

Dark Knight

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/42174540) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/42174540>.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | F/M , Gen , M/M |
| Fandom: | Naruto |
| Relationship: | Deidara & Hyuuga Hinata , Hyuuga Hinata/Hyuuga Neji , Deidara/Sasori (Naruto) , Hyuuga Hinata & Yakushi Kabuto , Hatake Kakashi/Yakushi Kabuto , Konan/Nagato Pain |
| Character: | Hyuuga Hinata , Deidara (Naruto) , Yakushi Kabuto , Hyuuga Neji , Uchiha Sasuke , Sasori (Naruto) , Uchiha Itachi , Naruto Ensemble |
| Additional Tags: | Originally Posted on FanFiction.Net , Fairy Tale Elements , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Enemies to Friends , Akatsuki - Freeform , Kidnapping , Other Additional Tags to Be Added |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2022-10-05 Completed: 2022-10-31 Chapters: 99/99 Words: 490341 |

Dark Knight

by [Digital Skitty \(skittidyne\)](#)

Summary

Once upon a time, there was a world where the dragons were noble and the white knight was a demon. Where the princess falls in love with the dark knight, and they help to take down their own kingdom. And where the dragons aren't vanquished in the end.

Notes

Author's Note: It's set in an alternate universe, but only because it wavers from the timeline so much. It has some very...odd things in it, so beware.

Important Variations from Timeline:

Sasuke got stopped by Naruto from leaving for Orochimaru.
Naruto never met Itachi or Kisame.
Kakashi killed Kabuto after he threatened Sasuke in the hospital.
Orochimaru hasn't left the Akatsuki yet.
Deidara hasn't joined the Akatsuki yet.

This novel begins at the beginning of the timeskip.

((2022 crosspost update: i'm posting my completed novels from ff.net onto ao3 for archiving purposes. please keep in mind that this was written when i was in high school, 07-08. until this is completely crossposted, you can read [the entire thing on fanfiction.net here](#).)

))

Then The World Exploded

Once upon a time...

-.-.-

Team 8 raced through the treetops, normal breakneck speed for shinobi. They were finally done with patrolling the borders for the past month, heading back to report to the Hokage. Hyuuga Hinata had her Byakugan activated, more as tradition and practice for her stamina than to look for actual danger. Kurenai was proud of her kunoichi; she had improved greatly since they all became chuunin. Their teamwork had skyrocketed, even more than she could've hoped possible. It almost made her think that something happened in those chuunin exams.

Kiba and Akamaru were chatting animatedly, but aside from that, the forest seemed silent. Unusually silent, but then again, a dog the size of a horse and four shinobi usually managed to scare most wildlife out of the area.

Shino stopped suddenly, chakra gluing his feet to the tree branch and halting his forward momentum. Kurenai was proud of her team; she, Kiba and Hinata stopped only a millisecond later, Hinata even on the same branch as the Aburame. "What is it, Shino-kun...?" she asked quietly. No stuttering, but then again, she successfully stopped stuttering around her teammates about a year ago.

Shino was holding out his hand, and on his palm a small butterfly had alighted. It fluttered its wings a few times, then flitted off without a sound. "There is news from Konoha. My father states that Tsunade-sama is expecting two Konoha shinobi back from an extended mission."

"Extended mission, huh?" Kiba said, cocking his head. "I don't know of any shinobi on any extended missions 'cept that brat, Naruto. He's been gone for awhile, hasn't he? About time he got back." The brunette absently patted Akamaru's shoulder, while the canine sniffed around idly. Hinata squeaked and immediately reddened at Naruto's name, and inwardly, Kurenai sighed. The kunoichi had made so much progress in other areas...except concerning Naruto. In fact, if anything, her infatuation with the blonde had worsened with the years.

"K-Kurenai-sensei?" the Hyuuga asked hesitantly, her voice a few notes higher than it usually was. And the stammer was back as well. "Could we pl-please speed up a bit? I-I would like to...um...be th-there to greet Naruto-kun, if at all possible..."

Well, at least that's brave of you, Hinata, Kurenai thought with a smile. "If it's alright with your teammates. It's alright with me," the black-haired jounin allowed. What harm could come from a bit of a sprint? Of course, the two guys couldn't say no to her.

-.-.-

Deidara had done it. Finally, *finally* he had tracked down one of the illustrious Akatsuki members.

And better yet, he had engaged him in battle and won. So now the blonde was slowly making his way back toward where the rumors stated the Akatsuki's hideout was, all the way across several countries. Several countries currently in a not-so-good relationship with Iwa. Sure, he was a missing-nin, but he was an *Iwa* missing-nin. It wouldn't do to get caught by any shinobi in any of the two countries he had to cross. So far, he was giving the hidden village Konoha suitable distance.

The explosives expert yawned and decided to take a break. Who knew that summers in the Fire Country would be so *hot*? He dropped down onto the ground, throwing his 'passenger' and bag down into a random bush beside him. It just felt so good to lay there on the cool dirt. He liked the dirt, and had never liked it so much as now, lying in it after three scalding days and three freezing nights without sleep. Especially living on soldier pills and lugging the body of the former Akatsuki-nin around. (He'd need proof of his kill, and he'd rather carry a whole body than just the severed head. That was just plain disgusting.) Deidara rolled around in the earth for a bit, getting dust and filth all over his clothes, skin and hair. But he really didn't care. For the first time in a long while, he was happy.

Until he felt the chakra of some unknown, likely Konoha, shinobi approaching at a very high speed. He barely had time to suppress his own chakra and stuff his things in a bush before the ninja themselves came into sight. It appeared to be a team of four Konoha shinobi. One, a woman with black hair and red eyes, appeared to be the leader of the squad. Deidara's eyes widened. *Is she an Uchiha?* He zoomed his hawk-eye onto her face. She definitely had red eyes, but he couldn't make out how many pupils. The blonde crouched down into the undergrowth, actually almost nervous; and he didn't even get a good look at the other three!

That was when the giant dog came out of nowhere and latched onto his shoulder.

--.-

"There she is!" Hinata pointed down to where Akamaru had just successfully ambushed the enemy. Her Byakugan had been on the whole while, and she had barely noticed the ninja before she suppressed her chakra. Obviously a skilled opponent. The cobalt-haired girl had notified her teammates beforehand of it, and they had just enough time to mask Akamaru's chakra to successfully pull off the attack.

"We want to capture, not kill! Hokage-sama may want to question her!" Kurenai barked out orders as the four descended upon the shinobi, who was fiercely wrestling with Akamaru.

"Her?!" the blonde snarled, and it became awkwardly apparent that he was male. At least, it would've been awkward had it not been a fight. Even with the giant canine on top of him, it was interesting that he had the audacity to shout at them.

"He's a missing-nin!" Kurenai yelled suddenly, and jumped back into a tree, already making hand signs. Hinata saw the tell-tale score across his hitai-ate as she also leapt back. It was her job to hang back unless it came to close-ranch combat or if one of her comrades got seriously injured.

He threw Akamaru away from him, a shower of kunai following the dog. Kiba jumped in and skillfully blocked nearly all of them, at the same time reaching into his bag for some soldier pills. Shino's kikai swarmed out from his sleeves, buzzing loudly and toward the blonde missing-nin. A pair of *Gatsuuga* also streaked toward him, and Kurenai was meanwhile disappearing into a tree in

one of her genjutsus. Hinata just waited on the sidelines, taking it all in with her pale eyes and subconsciously already putting her hands in the starting stance of the *Juuken*. But for the moment, she felt rather useless with her lack of longer-range jutsu.

-.-.-

Deidara was flat-out shocked that they had managed to spot him, much less send that great beast of a dog after him without him noticing. (And then the fact that they managed to spot him, but mistook his gender. What was the world coming to?) Still, so far, it was mediocre at best. The dog was large and had the element of surprise, but it only managed to give him a flesh wound. The dog's owner seemed loyal to him, and they worked well together. But their strange, spinning jutsu was easy enough to dodge. One of the kunoichi seemed to stay back, probably looking for a weak spot to attack later on. And the Uchiha, she had disappeared with some genjutsu, most likely.

So much for powerful Konoha shinobi.

Three of the other shinobi, the one wearing so many layers that it made Deidara sweat just to look at him, dropped down. But the Iwa-nin had heard the buzzing; this was one of those bug users. So one was the real one, and the other two were clones made of some insect. Probably to throw him by making him think they were shadow clones.

Deidara threw a punch with a broad grin. He loved seeing through opponent's strategies then pretending to fall for them. But his fist collided with nothing. His visible eye widened in shock as his punch arced through the coated shinobi's chest. This was just a regular clone, an *illusion*. And he had fallen for it. Too late to stop his forward momentum, Deidara just dove forward and turned his fall into a somersault, and popped up again behind the other two. He began to second guess himself, breaking one of the shinobi rules. *If that was a regular bunshin...but I knew I heard ninja insects...heh, 'nin-sects'*, Deidara stopped dead and chuckled at his mental joke. Not only did this confuse his opponents, it completely threw them off in their strategy. And although accidental, that was exactly what the blue-eyed blonde wanted.

The Uchiha kunoichi suddenly appeared behind him, and he felt a kunai pressed against his neck. Still, Deidara didn't tense or panic, like a good little shinobi. Instead, he blew up.

As the pieces of flaming clay rained down, Deidara snickered mentally from his hiding spot. Those idiots fell for a simple bunshin (albeit a clay one), and now he had all the experience and knowledge of their jutsus as he needed.

Plus, it turned out that the woman wasn't an Uchiha after all, and she was currently lying in a puddle of her blood, face-down. She was out of this battle, unless she turned out to be a medic-nin.

As the other four (counting that infernal dog) looked around wildly and noticed their sensei, Deidara sent down a little doll for them to play with, grinning gleefully. It exploded near that dog (he was really beginning to hate it, and he was never a dog person to begin with) and the brown-haired shinobi, successfully separating them.

He jumped down behind the other kunoichi, placing a kunai at her neck. Unlike his clone, he felt her stiffen slightly at the cold metal. "Alright, you two." Even though there were still two of the dress-like-it's-negative-twenty-out shinobi and the growling, doggy one with his hellhound. "You keep heading towards your little village, and I won't kill the girl. You try anything, and I kill her,

yeah." He had to wonder just how well-trained the Konoha shinobi were these days. If they were anything like his own village's, they would continue fighting regardless of a hostage.

Until he felt a gentle smack (it was more like a soft touch, or maybe even poke) in his stomach and suddenly his chakra system died. Deidara didn't have to worry about that, though; at the moment he was worried about the large bag of clay hidden in the bushes and the one strapped to his leg that were suddenly uncontrolled by his chakra. In short, he had about three seconds to get away before the whole forest detonated.

"Damn it!" Deidara let go of the girl as if burned, but he couldn't leave behind the body; it was his ticket into the Akatsuki. He couldn't let this whole thing go just because of one lucky punch. The kunoichi twirled around gracefully, though, and Deidara saw that it wasn't such a lucky punch. She was a Hyuuga. Changing his plans meant thinking, and thinking cost time, which was something he didn't have at the moment. So instead he just grabbed the girl's wrist, and ran in the opposite direction, shouting over his shoulder, "Get out of here, yeah!"

Then the world exploded.

Deidara had no idea why he had grabbed the enemy's hand, or even warned them. By all rights, he shouldn't have. But he did.

He tumbled head over heels at the force of the blast, and, unfortunately, having jumped up into a tree to try to escape, it sent him right into a branch. The tree folded him like paper, knocking every ounce of air out of his body. The blonde fell down into a (thorny, of course it had to be thorny) bush, and heard a rustle beside him. Probably the Hyuuga. Then there was a loud yelp (if he'd had the energy or oxygen, he would've cackled), and the explosion finally died down. Deidara was already scrambling up, still trying to breathe. That woman was so much ashes by now, but he didn't know about the other two, or that damn dog. The Hyuuga kunoichi was probably still alive, though.

The missing Iwa-nin stumbled over to his original hiding place, digging through the bush's leaves. Miraculously, the body was still recognizable; just goes to show how durable that particular Akatsuki member had been. Deidara didn't have much time now, and it was time for a decision. The Hyuuga would make a nice gift for the Akatsuki, since they might not be too keen on letting him in after killing one of their own. Did he dare kidnap a Hyuuga, piss off Konoha, and deal with her and her rescue team until either he joined the Akatsuki or got killed?

Sure, why not.

So Deidara took out a kunai and made his decision.

-.-.-

Hinata groaned, and wondered what just happened. She cut off chakra circulation to the *male* enemy's entire body, and suddenly he panicked and told them all to run. Worse, he had grabbed her and jumped into the air to escape just as something large and volatile exploded. She saw him crash into a tree branch, double over, and fall below, just before she was thrown into that same branch. Only the tree caught her thigh instead of waist, so as she heard a crack, she flipped over and landed on her head in the bush. And even after that, somehow her Byakugan remained activated, though significantly weaker.

Hinata struggled to get herself upright, wincing at the pain that shot up through her leg. But she would heal herself (she had picked up *some* basic healing jutsu, after all, she was still friends with Sakura) only after she checked on her teammates. The pale-eyed chuunin heard Akamaru yelp loudly, and then the enemy shinobi somehow managed to get up and rush over to the remains of a bush. He checked something, but his body was shielding it, so she couldn't tell what it was. It wasn't one of her teammates, that was for sure. Shino was getting up in a tree several yards behind her, and Kiba and Akamaru had both been thrown into the same tree as each other, cracking it. Neither one appeared to be moving.

Then the missing-nin (*Iwa?* she thought dazedly) came back over to her, a filled backpack on his back. He stared down at her for a moment, and Hinata would've shivered, had she been able to. His one-eyed stare (his long blonde hair hid half his face) seemed to look into her mind, or her soul. The irony was that people told her that *her* eyes supposedly made them feel the same.

Then, shockingly, he knelt down, and checked her for injuries. Even more shockingly, his chakra network was already starting to revive itself. Hinata struggled to raise her arm, hand in the *Juuken* form. He grabbed her wrist firmly, halting that and nearly breaking it at the same time. She felt something sharp cut her (it was more like a pinch, or even a bite), and her eyes widened. *Oh no, he's injected me with something*, she panicked, and tried to increase her chakra circulation. Hopefully that could stop enough of the toxins...

But then he drew his hand away, and it wasn't a needle, it was a *mouth* on his palm. He had *bitten* her with a *mouth* on his *hand*. The tongue slid out and licked up the few droplets of blood, then appeared to chew for a moment. Then, it spat out a tiny, miniscule clay bird. The man made a few hand signs with his other hand, and the bird sprang to life, soaring over toward the bush he'd been visiting earlier. It blew up with only a small explosion, and appeared to be creating some sort of rain.

My blood. He's sprinkling my blood over the area...throw off pursuers... Hinata thought wildly, and this time pumped chakra into her other hand while he was intent on his jutsu. She brought it up to collide with the bottom of his jaw, and she heard his teeth click together. Then, she pushed her other, chakra-filled hand into his chest, right over his heart.

The blonde missing nin jerked forward, eyes widened. He stared down at her with a mixture of shock and...joy, it almost looked like. Then he coughed, and droplets of blood landed on her face. A few ran down his chin, and the man grinned. He just ran his fist over his chin, only managing to smear the blood, and coughed again. Then the enemy picked Hinata up, threw her over his shoulder, and escaped.

Welcome Back, Naruto

Naruto arrived back in Konoha, after nearly two and a half years of training with that perverted teacher of his. It felt *great* to be back. He missed the casual chatter of people below him, as he stood on a roof and proclaimed to the world, "I missed this place!"

Jiraiya just laughed at him.

"Hey, you'd miss it too, if you were, uh, me!" Naruto shot back, and leapt deftly down onto the crowded street. Screw his teacher and reporting to Tsunade-baachan, he wanted to see his friends. The blonde ran joyously down the dirt road, until he saw the first familiar sight; a head of pink hair. The pinkette was talking animatedly to a dark-haired boy of about the same age. "Sakura-chan!" Naruto practically tackled her in a bear hug, and grabbed Sasuke around the shoulders with his other arm.

"N-Naruto?" Haruno Sakura stuttered, wide eyes. Naruto had missed those beautiful green eyes. The Kyuubi's container just grinned until he thought his face would rip off. "Oh, Naruto! I can't believe it's you! Oh, god, I've missed you so much!"

Soon she was hugging him back, whereas the moody Uchiha ducked out from his arm and crossed his own. "Hn. Idiot," Sasuke grunted, and looked bored.

But Naruto just leapt onto him in a hug, shouting, "Don't worry, I missed my favorite bastard, too!" Sasuke looked like he was about to hit him, for a moment, but then relaxed and smirked.

"Idiot," he repeated, and Naruto turned around just in time to catch Sakura's super powered fist in his face. He flew back into the nearest building, cracking the cement and falling forward onto his face limply.

"I DON'T CARE HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN GONE, YOU DON'T TALK TO SASUKE-KUN LIKE THAT, NARUTO!" the angry kunoichi howled, but stomped over to heal his injuries only moments later. Once he was walking again, the old Team 7 toured the village. Naruto marveled at all the new structures and people, Sasuke continued to look bored, and Sakura acted as the tour guide. "...And over here we have the new weapons shop, opened by Tenten's father, and across the street is...Wait, Naruto, shouldn't you be reporting to Tsunade-shishou if you just got back..."

"Eh, I don't want my mood ruined yet. First I want to go see all of the Rookie 9, and then Fuzzy-Brows, and go eat ramen, and—" Sakura cut him off with a smack to the head. Naruto whined, but it was obvious that he was still way too happy to let anything ruin his mood.

Until Tsunade, Kiba's older sister, Shino's father and Shino ran past, the two former carrying what appeared to be a severely wounded Kiba, Akamaru and Hinata.

The three members of Team 7 watched the procession with a mute shock, until Tsunade barked, "Sakura! I need help on this! Get Shizune and meet me in the ICU!"

"Right!" It went unsaid that Sasuke and Naruto would follow her. Tsunade didn't even appear to notice Naruto's presence. The pinkette managed to get hold of Shizune immediately, somehow, because the medic-nin met up with them halfway to the hospital.

"Sakura, what's wrong—Naruto! It's nice to see that you're back. Is that what this is about?"

"No, no! Tsunade called for us both; Hinata, Kiba and Akamaru have just arrived and appear

severely wounded! Shino seemed fine enough, but I didn't see Kurenai-sensei, either," Sakura informed her breathlessly as the four neared the hospital. "We're to report ASAP to the intensive care unit."

So thus Naruto and Sasuke had to spend the next fifteen minutes convincing the nurse at the desk that they *had* to check on their friends, whereas the two medics just rushed in without a word. It took a mixture of pleading, whining, and threatening from Naruto, and more subtle threats, calm logic, and the promise of a date from Sasuke for them to finally get past the girl.

"Idiotic, pathetic, hormone-driven, love struck cow of a kunoichi." Sasuke was hissing that and several similar insults under his breath the whole jog toward the ICU. Naruto was too busy being worried to stop (or join) him. But then, there was a shriek from the floor above them, and the sound of cement shattering. Something had either outraged Tsunade or upset her tremendously. The Uchiha and Uzumaki looked at each other for a brief moment. Then they both raced up the stairs (quicker than the elevator at their ninja speed), pushing past surprised or angry medics, and rounded the corner just in time to hear a growing buzz and Tsunade start shouting again.

"—did this, who did it, what did they look like, Shino?! They murdered Konoha shinobi, those bastards—" the Hokage ranted, and Naruto stopped dead. Someone was *killed*? Sasuke stopped a step ahead of him, only turning and raising an eyebrow.

"We got this far, idiot. Do you want to stop and go home now?" the dark-haired shinobi asked boredly. He looked like he didn't care either way, but then a chair crashed through the wall not a foot in front of him, and the buzzing sound intensified.

"Hokage-sama, do not take this out on my son!" Shino's father's voice shouted. But Tsunade continued on relentless with her tirade.

"—I will kill them all if I need to—"

"—Hokage-sama, it was only one shinobi—" Shino tried to cut in, but his voice, even raised, was barely audible over the din.

"—Kill them all...ONE?!" Tsunade screeched, and Naruto ducked into the room just in time to get hit in the head with another chair. He reeled back, obviously not the welcome he was expecting. Sasuke caught his shoulder, and gave him a push back into the room. The blonde just flopped over and landed on his head on the floor.

"Naruto?" Sakura looked up, her hands encased in blue healing chakra, held over Kiba's body. Sasuke shrugged, and decided to help him up before someone stepped on him. "Tsunade-shishou, Naruto is back, maybe he or Jiraiya-sensei would be able to confirm or deny your theories..." the pinkette stated clearly, hoping that she didn't get them in trouble by letting them know what happened.

"Hey! What happened?" Naruto said loudly, and Tsunade smacked him on the head.

"Quiet, you brat! This is an intensive care unit, not a daycare!" the blonde woman hissed, looking quite unaware of her hypocrisy.

Naruto just glared back at her, one hand holding his head, the other in a fist. "I demand to know what's happened to my friends! Shino, hey Shino?" He looked around the room, but he didn't see the bug user. Just two dark shinobi in the corner, probably Aburame, Kiba on the cot under Sakura and Shizune's careful jutsu, a HUGE Akamaru in the other corner, tended to by Kiba's older sister, and then a lump covered in a white sheet in the other bed. No Shino. "Hey! I heard Shino's voice in

here...What did you do to him, you old hag?!"

The shinobi wearing the forest green jacket cleared his throat loudly, and he started buzzing rather angrily. "You didn't recognize me, Naruto. I'm hurt," he stated clearly in Shino's voice. Naruto stared in awe at him, mouth agape. He didn't seem like he was going to reply to that, so Shino turned to the Hokage. "Hokage-sama, I've told you all I know. He was only a single shinobi, not much older or larger than I, most likely, with blonde hair covering half of his face and a blue eye. He was a missing-nin from Iwa, and appeared to utilize explosive jutsus. After Hinata cut off his chakra circulation, his jutsu exploded from the lack of control. He escaped after I was recovering from that massive explosion."

"Then how could he have pulled this off?!" Tsunade growled, and waved dismissively at Naruto and Sasuke. They decided to keep out of the Sannin's way and sat down in the two remaining chairs. "He managed not only to murder Konoha shinobi, he also managed *this*..." She gestured helplessly, then put her fingers to her temples. Naruto shot back to his feet.

"What do you mean, he murdered Konoha shinobi?! Who died?!" His blue eyes searched the room for a moment, until finally resting on the sheeted lump. Before anyone could stop him, (aside from a "Wait, Naruto!" shout from Sakura) he stepped over and pulled the cloth off with a flair.

It was a decapitated body.

Naruto stepped back, looking disgusted. "...Wait...Tsunade-baachan...you had Hinata when you came into the village! WHY DOESN'T SHE HAVE A HEAD NOW?! WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER?!" he shouted, and turned on the others. Sakura glanced at Shizune, who nodded, then got up. She eased over toward Naruto, holding up her hands in a gesture of peace.

"We didn't do anything, Naruto. Yes, we were carrying in 'Hinata' to the hospital, but the illusion just wore off now. It was just a Henge to make it look like Hinata..." she explained slowly, calming him down. "It's not Hinata, Naruto. We think..." She glanced at her teacher, "We think that she was...kidnapped...by the missing-nin."

"...But then...who is that? And who was murdered—Oh." Naruto's face fell, and he glanced back toward the headless corpse. "That's...Kurenai-sensei?"

"No. It's not. Her remains are being retrieved now," Shino stated in a business-like tone, but somehow his voice sounded tight. "That corpse is not Kurenai-sensei."

"Then...who is it?" the blonde asked, after glancing at Shino, as if to make sure that it was him that spoke. He looked like he'd rather not know, however.

"We can't be completely sure," Sakura sighed, but Tsunade made an odd little sound and crossed her arms over her ample chest, "But...—"

"It's Orochimaru." Sasuke suddenly spoke up, and his voice was dangerously low. One hand was unconsciously placed over the cursed seal, and his eyes bled crimson into the Sharingan.

"Tsunade, it's Orochimaru, isn't it?"

The Hokage only nodded stiffly. Naruto's eyes widened, and he thought, *Well, if this isn't the perfect way to come back to Konoha...*

Later that night, after Tsunade had been able to figure a few things out and sort most of the mess out, she realized that she had a hell of a problem on her hands. Orochimaru had been murdered and beheaded by some rogue unknown, apparently from Iwa. The Kazekage was coming for a political visit just tomorrow, too, so it wasn't as if she had time to mount a full-scale retaliation. Hyuuga Hinata had been kidnapped by the same rogue ninja, and her father Hiashi was furious at her for letting a Hyuuga get kidnapped not twenty kilometers from the village's gates.

She could not afford to have a war *inside* the gates at a time like this. So, in order to placate the Hyuuga clan, she agreed to send a squad of at least four shinobi as the first rescue attempt. The blonde woman didn't have high hopes for the team, but she couldn't afford to create a team of ANBU at the current time. So instead her team of four rescuers stood in front of her, looking either disinterested, worried, or fierce.

Uchiha Sasuke was only dragged into this mission by Naruto. Still, now that the blonde idiot was finally back, a life-threatening rescue like this was his idea of a fun reunion. But Hinata was a Konoha shinobi, too, and a member of the Rookie 9 to boot.

Haruno Sakura was the worried one, absently twirling a lock of her cotton candy pink hair on a finger. She and the other three kunoichi of the Rookie 9 (plus Team Gai) had really bonded since that last chuunin exam. This felt like losing a sister. Plus, Hinata never was the strongest ninja, but she could take care of herself with her Byakugan...but against someone who had managed to kill Orochimaru?

Uzumaki Naruto was feeling fiercely loyal to her because of this, although in his memory, she was nothing more than a comrade and a weird, shy girl who seemed to follow him a lot. But she was a quiet girl; she needed protecting. Plus, he wouldn't let some rogue ninja completely *maul* his welcome back to Konoha by pulling off a kidnapping right before his eyes!

And finally, Hinata's cousin himself, Hyuuga Neji stood solemnly, stiff as a board in front of the Hokage. One lock of his dark hair had fallen into his face, but he didn't twitch in the least to move it. If one didn't know better, it was almost as if he was struggling not to do something he'd regret, or maybe even cry. He just remained stoic and rigid as Tsunade briefed them on the mission details.

"Now, contrary to popular belief, this mission is *not* a rescue mission. You are to only scout out the area, see if you can pick up this rogue's trail, and retrieve Hyuuga Hinata *if and only if* you have a clear shot of doing that with no harm to yourselves or her. *Do not* confront this shinobi. Remember, he single-handedly took down three chuunin and a jounin nearly simultaneously, as well as one of the Sannin." Sasuke twitched imperceptibly. "You will have three weeks to gather as much information as you can. If you do get into a fight with him, come back immediately afterward. Sakura, you are the medic-nin on this squad. I have complete faith in you and your skills, but still, *come back immediately* if you get into a fight with him, or if he even notices you. I cannot risk more shinobi's lives with this man. After three weeks, if none of you come back, you will have one more week before pronounced dead, MIA, or missing-nin."

The four nodded silently. Tsunade sighed; it was the Sasuke retrieval mission all over again, sending untrained rookies out on an A-rank mission... But then again, they weren't rookies anymore. Sakura was a skilled medic-nin, Neji and Sasuke were both jounin, and Naruto was... well, he was skilled, even though technically a genin. This was most likely the best team she could wrangle up considering the circumstances.

"You have your mission assignment. Leave immediately!" Tsunade barked, and dismissed them.

And thus began the hunt for Hinata and the mysterious Iwa-nin.

Shame, Similarities, and Soldier Pills

Deidara had once again been traveling for days, and though it didn't tax his body in the least (with enough soldier pills, anything's possible!), he was beginning to worry about this Hyuuga. She hadn't spoken yet, but she had definitely woken up. She had only accepted one of the soldier pills he offered her (because truthfully, he didn't have anything else edible on him), and refused to make eye contact with him.

He was actually beginning to worry about her.

Deidara had never exactly kidnapped anyone before, not even as a Iwa jounin (he had never quite made it to the ANBU status, not that he wanted to). Let alone a girl. In fact, much to his embarrassment, he hadn't even really dated all that much, and didn't have any female friends he could speak of. He didn't have that many friends, period, before he left. All the guys thought he was a girl, so that made things awkward, and all of the girls thought he was too... weird to hang out with. Weird as in girly-looking, acting, and saying 'yeah'. And he tended to call people the weirdest names...

"Bya-chan, why aren't you talking, yeah?" In his defense, the girl wasn't talking, and he had to call her *something*... "Are you feeling okay? Are you hungry, yeah?"

The navy-haired kunoichi just shook her head. Deidara sighed and hung his head. He had actually thought he had gotten a small smile when he had first called her that, but they definitely weren't making any headway now. In fact, he was surprised he got a reaction at all.

"So... um... yeah." Deidara cast about for a topic. Truth was, he hated the silence, and maybe if he found the right thing to talk about, she would talk back. An actual conversation would be nice. The Iwa-nin didn't fancy himself such a bad guy; he had only tied up her hands, standard shinobi procedure, but she was otherwise unharmed and unbound. Any other kidnapper probably would've beaten her senseless and bound her so tightly she couldn't breathe. "So... uh... Oh. How did your leg heal up, Bya-chan, yeah? I'm not the best medic around, I know..." The explosives expert rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

The girl just looked down at it as they continued walking at a leisurely pace. They were taking a break, but Deidara didn't like to sit still, so his breaks were usually just a nice stroll. She didn't seem to be limping, so she just offered a small nod. What that meant, though, was anyone's guess. Deidara nodded thoughtfully, but was once again with a lack of conversation. "So... Bya-chan... what was your life like, yeah? I mean, before all of this crap..." (Deidara forced himself not to swear; it was impolite for a lady to hear. Just because he was a rogue ninja, a jerk, and a punk didn't mean he wasn't chivalrous. To those he deemed worthy.) It was the only thing he could think of.

The Hyuuga didn't reply, or make any gestures. If anything, she tensed up.

Deidara looked sideways at her, smiling. "A tough home life, yeah? I know what you mean." She blinked in slight surprise, and twitched, as to look at him. But she remained staring fixedly ahead. Deidara didn't care; he felt he was making some progress with their relationship. Whatever the heck that was. "So... you're a Hyuuga kunoichi, and you had a tough life... Let's make stuff up, yeah! Let's see... you're a beautiful princess, locked inside her castle, with many knights to protect her but no one as her friend. Her father, the king, is always busy with ruling the kingdom and training all the knights, and never has any time for her. Her mother, the queen, she is... hmm. She's off visiting with her friends and throwing parties all the time, yeah? So the princess is all alone,

except maybe her stoic, guardian knights and maybe a pet... what's your favorite animal, Bya-chan?"

She didn't say anything, if anything, she tensed up even more. Deidara frowned, and tapped his chin thoughtfully. He didn't want her getting mad at him, and do that weird taijutsu on him again. His body was *still* sore, and his chakra was *still* recovering. So he decided to try and give her a happier ending, or at least a happier story.

"So then... Bya-chan is trapped up in her castle, with her little pet bird and all her guardian knights. She's waiting and waiting for the day her white knight will come, yeah. She's seen so many knights and some of them are really nice to her, but her heart is still set on this one particular knight... But he never notices her. She needs something to get his attention, but no matter how hard she tries, he's just too dense to notice something right in front of him." Deidara turned around, walking backwards in front of her. This seemed to catch her off guard; her lavender eyes widened slightly and she actually looked at him. He just grinned and continued. "But then, a great big dragon comes out of nowhere, and kidnaps the princess Bya-chan! So now her white knight is eagerly joining in the rescue effort, while the evil dragon Deidara soars away with the princess, yeah. Will they catch up? Or will the princess be doomed to have her only friend as the evil Deidara? Will the evil Deidara be friends with princess Bya-chan? Only time will tell, yeah!" he cried triumphantly, spreading out his arms. He saw her eyes follow the mouths on his hand, but he didn't mind. In fact, he was used to people staring at him for that reason.

"And then—" the blue-eyed shinobi started, but the back of his heel caught on a root, and he tripped. He, an elite, rogue ninja, *tripped* over a *root*. He landed on his back, too, which was completely disgusting because his backpack with the Akatsuki's head in it was still on his back. The rope connecting him to the Hyuuga's bound hands jerked her forward as well, and she stumbled toward him, staring wide-eyed at him and his clumsiness. She was probably shocked that an elite, rogue ninja tripped as well.

Deidara slowly got up, trying not to completely spazz over falling on a disgusting, bloody, messy severed head. And bloody, explosive clay. That was packed around the head as well, disgustingly enough. But after his clay pouch disintegrated, he really had nowhere else to store it.

Then the girl *laughed*.

At least, it sounded like a laugh. But it was so short Deidara had to stop his little "oh-my-gosh-this-is-so-gross-get-it-off" dance and wonder if he even really heard it. Bya-chan put her bound hands up to her mouth, covering it and looking mortified. She was rapidly turning red as well, so Deidara was pretty sure that the sound had indeed been a laugh. "...Wow, yeah. Bya-chan *does* have vocal chords!" he exclaimed, then laughed himself. In fact, he cracked up, doubling over and laughing at his own stupidity and clumsiness. Here he was, elite, rogue ninja of Iwa, telling fairy tales about his kidnapped victim and worrying about how disgusting a mere severed head was. It was just all so pathetic, it was funny.

But after his fit of hysterical giggles, to which the Hyuuga kunoichi just looked on with a reddened face, he decided that it was time to really move again. The sooner he got to the Akatsuki, the less attached he would be to the girl. After all, he was handing her over for her Byakugan; surely she'd be experimented upon and then die. And then the Akatsuki would figure out the secrets of Konoha's best bloodline limit. He *really* shouldn't be getting attached to her.

But that didn't stop him.

Hinata had no idea what was going on. This shinobi seemed inhumane in his fighting; he hurt Kurenai-sensei, blew up all that forest, his chakra control and levels were amazing... and yet he was sitting here, making conversation, trying to get her to chat with him, telling her stories, and then tripping and laughing about it. If he wasn't an enemy shinobi, he probably would've been an alright guy.

But she couldn't think like that. He *was* enemy, and that was the fact of the matter. Nothing would change that, and nothing ever would.

Still, even though he was an enemy that she should hate and try to kill on a regular basis, he was still a male, and thus she was shy. She had decided to not talk (they could take her Byakugan and her life but she'd never give up the secrets of Konoha), but not looking at him was just her nature. His blonde hair, joking nature and random conversations almost reminded her of—*No! I mustn't think that way! This is that Stockholm Syndrome they always warned us about in the academy*, she thought, panicky. And they had only spent a few days together! She wouldn't let herself be swayed any more, and would look for a time to make her escape.

But when he started telling her the story of her life, with so many parallels and similarities it was unnerving, she was nearly moved to tears. It just reminded her of all the things she would miss if she couldn't get back to her home, her friends, or her family. But then he proceeded with his theatrical ending, it almost cheered her up. Even *he* seemed to believe that she would get rescued, somehow.

And then he tripped, and she had slipped. She had giggled, and he had noticed. Hinata hurriedly tried to cover it up, but he (Deidara, that was his name) had noticed nonetheless. And then he had started laughing.

She had to wonder if he was even sane.

But then they resumed normal ninja travel speed, which was a bit of a relief. Without her arms to help balance, she had to focus on jumping, which was fine with her. And Deidara didn't seem to talk as much while they were jumping from branch to branch. She took the time to come up with her mental plan: focus on him, gather information on him. If possible, she could relay this information to Konoha, or perhaps some other village. It could be important later on. She already knew some about his fighting style, and a lot about his style of speech (he spent a lot of time talking to himself or her). She also knew that his name was Deidara, and he was a missing-nin from Iwa. Surely that could help someone, right?

He didn't appear that old, either. Maybe only a couple of years older than herself. His hair was surprisingly long, however, and a bright blonde that was nearly the perfect match for Naruto's. She had to admit, she liked that half-ponytail he kept it in. Ever since she grew her own hair out, she had been searching for ways to tie it back for fighting or sparring without looking like some weirdo.

Deidara turned to glance back at her, and Hinata blushed and quickly looked away. She was *not* just looking at him, assessing and comparing him. She was *not*. He did *not* have blonde hair like Naruto, and she did *not* like his hair. Not one single bit.

And she definitely did *not* notice how his blue eyes almost seemed to match Naruto's, but were just a shade deeper and more angled. Or how both of them seemed to have this intense stare when they

wanted to study someone. Like he was doing now to her.

The Hyuuga just concentrated on keeping pace with him, stubbornly keeping her pale eyes on her feet. But she couldn't help but wonder why he hid half his face under his hair; it was like Kakashi-sensei's mask back in Konoha. All the shinobi in the village wondered about that enigma from time to time, the kunoichi more so. Mystery just attracted girls. So Hinata had to wonder if he had a scar, or different colored eyes, or maybe only one eye, or maybe some sort of strange eye bloodline limit in only one eye, like the Sharingan or Byakugan.

Then again, maybe his hands were the bloodline limit, if he had one. She didn't know much about the village Iwa, just that it was far enough away that she never thought about it. She did know, though, that at one point Konoha was at war with Iwa, and their relations were still rather tense... What if this whole thing started a war? Hinata's eyes widened, and she bit her lip. Almost starting a war (again) was bad enough... Her friends were all chuunin or jounin now, so they'd be sent off as well... What if she got her friends killed by getting kidnapped? Even if this Deidara *was* a missing-nin, he was still technically an Iwa shinobi.

Unbidden, the poor girl felt tears start to well up in her eyes. She bit down on her lower lip harder, struggling not to cry. If her friends got killed... What about Naruto? He'd definitely be gung-ho about joining in some war, especially if one of the Rookie 9 was a key in it. And Neji-niisan wouldn't stop searching for her, no matter what. And Shino-kun and Kiba-kun and Kurenai-sensei—the Hyuuga heir inhaled sharply. Kurenai-sensei... hadn't she been... no, she couldn't have...

Suddenly the force of this whole thing hit her, and Hinata almost cried. From desperation, from sorrow, from guilt, even from embarrassment and sheer panic. She felt hot tears stinging at the back of her special eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. She *was* a Konoha kunoichi, so she had to do something about this! She squeezed her eyes shut and willed the unshed tears away, shaking her head a bit to clear her mind.

Unfortunately, closing your eyes and shaking your head is not a good thing to do when distracted and traveling at high speeds by jumping from branch to branch.

She felt the wood underneath her sandal scrape pathetically; she had over jumped. And without her arms to balance herself, Hinata fell. The first thing that tried to break her momentum was a branch, the same branch that she slipped off of. Her back collided painfully with it, but the next thing that tried to stop her was much more painful. The ropes binding her hands together, along with the leash's end in Deidara's hands, jerked her upward by the wrists. Hinata heard a surprised yelp; the rope had probably just flew out of his hands, to his likely dismay.

But instead, her fall was arrested several yards above the ground, hanging by her arms. A surprised and confused Deidara was hanging not a foot from her face, held up by one arm while the rest of him dangled limply. Apparently he had gotten it into his head to tie his end of the rope around his own hand.

"...Huh?" The blonde blinked as if he just realized his situation. "What just happened, yeah?"

Hinata opened her mouth to speak, but remembered her vow of silence just in time. Instead she just turned red and tried not to cry from the humiliation. Deidara blinked again, then looked up at the rope. It was caught on a rather sturdy, stubborn branch too high above their heads to even try getting to. "Huh," he repeated, then smiled. "Okay, no need to worry, Bya-chan! I'll just gnaw through my end of the rope, and then I'll jump down and catch you, yeah." He seemed proud of his rather idiotic scheme, grinning broadly.

But then, there was a loud cracking sound, and they both sunk downward a few inches. "Uh-oh."

Deidara and Hinata both looked at each other for a moment, and then the branch gave way and they both fell. Of course, being shinobi, both landed gracefully on their feet, until the branch came down as well. Both shinobi bolted—in opposite directions. The result was a taut cord that halted them both, and the branch landed squarely on top of it, yanking them both down to the ground by their hands.

Deidara was the first to get back up, red-faced and chuckling. The mouth on the palm of his hand spat out his end of the rope as the other hand dusted himself off. "Well, that was embarrassing. How about we never talk of this moment again, yeah?" He kept laughing in embarrassment, and carefully stepped over the limb. "Are you alright, Bya-chan?"

Hinata was even redder than he was, and was still willing herself not to cry. Enemy shinobi or not, that was just plain *mortifying* for anyone calling themselves a ninja. And after all of that so-called progress she had made, in strength and personality...reduced back to her weak, whimpering, blushing, academy-student self by a poor jump and this peppy blonde missing-nin. It was degrading, pure and simple. The Hyuuga tried to get her hands free of either the rope or the branch on top of it, but couldn't. So she just twisted onto her side and curled up into a ball, eyes squeezed shut and hair splaying out behind her in the dirt. And why care? She was already muddy, scratched, dirty and humiliated from this whole ordeal.

"Bya-chan?" Deidara repeated, this time something like concern edging into his voice.

Oh, great, the enemy is feeling sorry for me... That makes everyone I know... I'm such a disgrace to everyone, Hinata thought dejectedly from inside her fetal position. And now I'm feeling sorry for myself again, I really shouldn't do that anymore, but I can't help it... Why can't I seem to change myself? Why must I be stuck as this helpless little girl all my life?

-.-.-

Deidara was still confused over what the heck just happened (he was just merrily on his way toward the Akatsuki hideout when all of a sudden he was yanked backward and hanging from a tree by his hand, and then the tree almost fell on top of him!), but the dark-haired kunoichi didn't seem alright. He was already mostly over his embarrassment, but she just curled into a ball and laid there limply. *Is she hurt? Does she not want to show me her injury? Why do females always worry about seeming weak...? They should just accept that they are! Or is she plotting some sort of attack, now that I am not holding onto her any more?* That thought alone made Deidara wary, but that didn't seem like a plotting-curl-up, it was more of a... hopeless-curl-up.

"Bya-chan?" he asked again, concerned about her. (*Why should I be concerned about my victim? Is this some sort of weird genjutsu she pulled on me, to make me feel sorry for her? I mean, I really shouldn't be worrying about a kunoichi who I'm just using as a prize!*) Deidara mentally shook his head. *Of course* he was worried about her; she could be his ticket into the Akatsuki. Or maybe a trade for his life, if they didn't like him that much. Simple as that. "You okay, yeah?"

Against his wishes and better judgment, he knelt down beside her. He reached out to place a hand on her shoulder, but stopped; he had seen the way she looked at his hands. Everyone looked at them that way. They were disgusted, horrified, no matter the value they had in ninjutsu. So instead he opted to poke her with one finger, repeating once more, "Bya-chan? What's wrong, yeah?"

At the physical touch, she jerked open from her curl and twisted around to stare, wide-eyed at him.

Her usually white eyes were tinged pink-ish, as if she had been crying, or trying not to. Her cheeks were even redder, though from what Deidara had no clue; crying, almost crying, or shame. Deidara must've made some sort of face, because she squeezed shut her eyes and turned away from him.

"Hey, Bya-chan, we need to get going." He prodded her again, and set his other hand across his knees. She just stayed turned away from him. "I'll tie you up and carry you if I have to, yeah." Actually, that was a lie. That rope was the only rope he had, and it wasn't nearly enough to tie up anyone. Especially since shinobi rule dictated that the victim must be bound from the chest down to their waist, hands pinned firmly to their sides, and there was no way Deidara had enough rope for that, particularly for her big breasts—okay, he was *not* going there. Deidara instantly looked away from her, blushing lightly and glaring at nothing in particular.

"Fine then, yeah. I'll carry you." He stood up hurriedly, and cracked his knuckles, hoping to scare her out of it. Not that he couldn't carry someone at high speeds for a long time—he had been doing that before with the Akatsuki member's body. It was just that he considered that rather rude, and if the poor girl was crying, she deserved to be handled with respect. *Yeah, that was it*, Deidara told himself.

Still, the Hyuuga didn't move. So he knelt down and picked her up bridal-style, then shifted her to carry the surprised kunoichi over his shoulder. She might've squeaked some protest, but he didn't care. Deidara was too busy trying not to care what happened to his victim, trying not to get attached, even though he was a lonely guy and she was the first company he had for awhile that didn't try to kill him. He really, *really* didn't want to make friends with someone he'd just later hand over to the Akatsuki for a spot in their ranks. Really, she was just a prize, a bargaining token, to him. That was all.

Still, not three hours later, when Deidara's solder-pill-induced energy began to wear off, he found himself talking to her again. "Bya-chan, I'm running out of solder pills, yeah," he whined, as if she could do something about it. "I hate cooking, and you'd probably get sick over it if I tried to catch any animals to cook, either. And honestly, I can't tell the difference between the good mushrooms and the bad mushrooms, yeah..."

She said nothing, not even when he finally set her down and sat down himself. Her hands were still bound, but basically, if she could outrun him, there was nothing he could do to stop her. Feeling moody and depressed from the lack of proper nutrition, company and childhood memories, Deidara groaned and propped himself up against a tree. "Why does all this stuff have to happen to *me*? Yeah. I mean, the Konoha weather is horrible towards me, enemy shinobi are horrible toward me, the forest is horrible toward me, *I'm* horrible toward me... I would've just let you guys pass overhead, really, Bya-chan. If you hadn't spotted me and sent that hel—I mean, dog, yeah, after me... I didn't want to get into all this trouble, I didn't plan on kidnapping you, or fighting anyone, or having to decapitate that nasty corpse and have to carry around his head..." the blonde complained, and set his chin on his hands.

"And now I'm actually feeling tired, and I think that's messing with my head, 'cause I'm feeling all these emotions I shouldn't be, yeah... I feel tired, and I'm frustrated, and I'm actually really, really scared that the Konoha ANBU or the Akatsuki—" Deidara stopped himself, and suddenly seemed much less talkative. He couldn't believe he was pouring out his soul to this random shinobi, a kunoichi who he didn't even know the name of! Plus, if she did manage to escape somehow, she'd just end up using it all against him, anyway.

And to make matters worse, he really *was* tired and frustrated and scared, and he couldn't sleep it off. If he went to sleep, she would run back to Konoha and tell them all about him. He did *not* want that. In fact, looking back, he realized that no matter how much potential, or strength, or chakra, or

clay he had, this plan wasn't very thought out. At all. Deidara groaned and hit his head against the tree.

And still, the girl stayed silent, not even laughing at his emotional anguish or telling him off for repeatedly smacking his head against the tree.

Shinobi rule number six: never second guess or doubt yourself, your commander, or your instincts. But in his defense, Deidara thought whoever thought up those shinobi rules should go do the world a favor and get blown up.

Speaking of getting blown up, Deidara found that he hadn't thought about art *all day*. It really was quite amazing. Usually that was what got him through the day. And even more surprising and amazing, he found himself talking, *yet again*. He really was a talkative little ninja. "...And I can't believe I'm actually doing all this. The Akatsuki is a legend, if anything, and I'm just chasing dreams, yeah. I haven't thought any of this through, and frankly, I'm just a stupid little kid who decided to go be a great ninja. Instead, I'm sitting here, pouring my soul out to Bya-chan, second-guessing myself and worrying over trivialities and... yeah. Haha, I'm a horrible shinobi. I have no idea how I got to be a jounin, anyway." He laughed harshly, and stretched. It was going to be a long, silent night, and he couldn't let himself sleep a wink. So instead he popped his second to last soldier pill in his mouth, calculating that in three day's time he should be well out of Konoha's territory. Hopefully he could stock up on supplies then.

The Hyuuga didn't say anything, just remained sitting against the tree trunk, pale eyes wide and watching him warily. Her embarrassment seemed to be completely forgotten, and Deidara could see how the Hyuuga got to be such a feared clan. Those eyes were *creepy*, especially only lit by the moonlight.

"Good night, Bya-chan, yeah," he said finally, and crossed his arms to wait until morning.

Make Him Pay

Sasuke was happy. Quite happy, in fact. Tailing a rogue shinobi, bickering with Naruto and Neji both, watching Naruto and Neji bicker, and finally possibly finding a lead to his brother were all plus things in his mind. (Minus would be Sakura's tagging along (it's not that he hated her, she just still annoyed him at times), Naruto's new attitude, and Neji's tense coldness toward them all.) The Uchiha was completely content to spend *weeks* tailing this mysterious guy with little sleep or food. He loved being a ninja.

"Naruto, hurry it up! You're falling behind!" Sakura called over her shoulder. The blonde stifled a yawned and muttered something like "no sleep with Ero-sennin, no sleep now" as an excuse and hurried to catch up. Sasuke snorted at him, and leapt onto the next branch. For a brief moment, he and Neji were side-by-side, and he could've *sworn* that the stoic Hyuuga rolled his eyes in Naruto's direction. But one never could tell with those pale eyes, and it only left Sasuke looking minorly annoyed and surprised at his uncharacteristic slip.

The four had been traveling roughly for four days now, and though they had definitely caught the trail of the Iwa-nin and Hinata and appeared to be catching up to them, they really didn't seem to be getting any closer. Worse yet, it appeared as if he was *taunting* them. (Another minus in Sasuke's mind.) He appeared to stop for the night, or at least for a few good hours every night, and only traveled during the day. Just how fast was this Iwa-nin?!

And then they came upon the branch.

Neji, of course, noticed it first with his Byakugan. "Halt," he called out, and the other three stopped immediately. In just the clearing ahead, a large, unnaturally broken branch lay. The tree it fell from was a sturdy tree, and the branch high up, which only made it more curious. Then Naruto noticed that a piece of rope seemed to be stuck under it, holding up one end, which appeared gnawed-on.

"Look at this, guys... Did some animal come over to chew on it?" he asked blankly, studying the frayed end intently. "Wonder what kind of big animal could've broken this thing..."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. It most definitely *wasn't* an animal that broke it, but why the hell would this enemy shinobi break off this limb, stick a piece of rope under it, and leave it there for them to find? Was it some sort of mind games? (Because even with Hinata's added weight, there was no way this guy would be heavy enough to break that branch just by standing, or even jumping up and down, on it. Plus, wouldn't he be breaking branches right and left if he were?) It just didn't make sense, and Sasuke figured that if he thought about it too much, he'd either fall into the trap or get a headache.

Neji apparently thought something along the same lines, because he was hurrying them along only moments later. "This was recently broken; we may be closing in on Hinata-sama," was actually all he said, but it got Sakura and Naruto going again quick enough.

Sasuke almost didn't wish they were closing in so quickly. He almost wanted this shinobi to lead him to the Akatsuki. Because then he could get his brother, and probably his partner, too. And any of the other bastards he could take down as well. Just thinking about revenge made him subconsciously activate the Sharingan. The world suddenly got more acute, more focused, and they all seemed to be moving painfully slow. He could travel so much faster if it was just himself...

Neji noticed Sasuke had activated his own bloodline limit, and the subtle expressions that followed. The Hyuuga prodigy almost smirked; he knew what was probably going through his mind. Instead, it came out as more of a grimace. Nonetheless, he pressed on, and ignored the expressions of his temporary teammates. Regardless of the Hokage-sama's orders, the second they confronted this opponent who *dared* to kidnap Hinata, he would *Juuken* him into oblivion.

But aside from his subtle and silent rage, there was a seed of guilt in Neji's mind. He was supposed to be Hinata's protector, her guardian. Hiashi had been quick to mention that in his rant with the Hokage. (No, wait, it had been a mere *suggestion* that Neji and some other shinobi (he probably wouldn't have been happy that it turned out to be the Uchiha and Uzumaki) chase after the Hyuuga heir.) Neji doubted he had ever seen his uncle that angry at anything or anyone. And Neji was even angrier than him at this shinobi.

After all, Hinata was *his* responsibility, *his* cousin, *his* friend, just plain *his*. Naruto was only along because of his general sense of justice, and the other two because he dragged them along. Neji had no doubt that they were more than competent shinobi, but he would've rather done this alone. Or better yet, with ANBU or his own team. But destiny just wouldn't leave him be. So he got stuck with one of the only people ever to defeat him in battle, the only person his cousin was infatuated with, and then a moody Uchiha and an overly-worried medic.

He sped up instead, Byakugan straining to the limits of his vision, to take anything in, hopefully catch the back of their target and his cousin soon...

The other three seemed more than happy to increase their speed as well. Strangely enough, the more energy Naruto expended, the more he seemed to gain. Sasuke was stoic and silent as always, and Sakura didn't seem that worse for wear. But then Neji noticed the odd bit of red chakra floating around in the blonde's normally blue chakra system, and Naruto still really didn't seem to tire.

Curious, Neji decided to speed up again. This time, Sakura squeaked a small complaint, but kept up nonetheless. Sasuke was traveling beside him, keeping pace effortlessly. Naruto's chakra just handed out a few more bits of red chakra, and he seemed fine. Very odd. The genius knew that Naruto was naturally and usually energetic, but they were traveling at a speed that had even the Hokage's apprentice whining. That was strange.

That was when Neji saw his cousin.

He stopped dead. Sasuke over jumped the next branch in his effort to look back at him, and instead fell on a lower branch; Sakura stopped a few yards ahead of him; Naruto nearly crashed into her. Neji's eyes were wide and unblinking, making sure that this wasn't some genjutsu or prank. It was definitely Hinata.

She didn't appear bound or injured or under any sort of jutsu. In fact, she appeared to be dozing, leaning against a tree trunk with her head tilted slightly. But then Neji saw the enlarged veins around her eyes, and knew it was just a ruse.

Likewise, Neji spotted the Iwa-nin only a moment later. He, too, was propped up against a tree, pretending to be dozing. The Iwa-nin looked much differently than he had expected; long blonde hair, slight frame, and an actual, relaxed smile weren't in his mental image of him. The man (though he didn't look much older than them, and that made Neji grimace again) shifted slightly, so he was almost facing them. Neji's eyes widened; had he noticed them? How? They were more than

a kilometer away. Not even Hinata could really be sure of their presence at this time.

Maybe Neji had *already* underestimated their opponent.

"Neji, what is it?" Naruto was busy stage-whispering. Neji motioned for him to keep it down, then beckoned them all closer.

"Listen. I see them both. Hinata-sama appears unbound and unharmed—for the moment. We will need to approach cautiously; we don't want the Iwa-nin to use her as a shield—"

"Neji! We are supposed to *follow* them and gather *information*! Tsunade-shishou said not to confront them!" Sakura hissed, and clenched her fists dangerously. Neji gulped, and decided to take this conversation out of the dangerous waters.

"I believe he has already spotted us. Somehow," he admitted slowly. The other three had varying levels of surprise: Naruto's jaw dropped, Sakura gasped softly, but Sasuke's expression just seemed to darken slightly. Neji remained calm. "It could be that he had some perimeter jutsu around, or even perhaps an ally or partner. It could be any number of things. Sakura-san, I believe this counts as a confrontation."

The pinkette looked concerned, but slowly nodded. "Yeah..."

Neji nodded back at her. "You three know each other's jutsu and fighting style perfectly. You really don't know mine all that well. I'll go ahead with my Byakugan, and—"

"No," Sasuke interrupted, Sharingan standing out starkly against his pale skin. Neji raised an eyebrow, motioning for him to continue whatever the heck his interruption was about. "Too risky. If he's after Hyuuga, cursed seal or not, he'll capture you as well." (Neji narrowed his eyes slightly at the mention of the seal.) "We'll head in, you and I first. By the time we get there, I'll already know your movement style. Give me another minute to watch you fight him, and I'll know your fighting style well enough to work with you. Then Sakura and Naruto can act as our back-up. Sakura can heal us if we are injured seriously, or, with her super-strength, she can create a distraction by shattering the nearby forest. If this guy is really an explosives expert, he'll have to pay attention to that before continuing our fight."

"But hey! What would I do?" Naruto demanded, cutting off Neji's reply. Sasuke just rolled his eyes in his direction. "You bastard, I'll—"

"With your shadow clones, you're the perfect distraction, Naruto. After Sakura creates her disruption, you create a lot of those, and rush in to attack him. But it wouldn't be a serious attack; only if Neji and I are wounded. You are the *back-up*, got it? Idiot..." the Uchiha hissed at him, then returned his stare to Neji.

Damn, he knew I wanted to go in alone, he thought wryly, surveying Sasuke coolly. And he knows there's really no way for me to refuse his strategy suggestion, mission leader or not...

The two geniuses glared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, then finally Neji muttered, "Fine. Sasuke's strategy works." He distracted himself by watching a tawny bird flutter around toward them, anything but looking at Sasuke. *You've won this round, Uchiha.*

Sasuke smirked triumphantly. He knew Neji wanted to go on ahead, play the hero to rescue his cousin. But at the same time, he would get his ass handed to him. It sounded as if this guy was *at least* a jounin level, and an explosives expert. He didn't know how well Neji's *Kaiten* would stand up to sheer explosive power, and neither did the Hyuuga.

In fact, now Neji was just plain not looking at him—rather childish. He was resolutely staring at something with his Byakugan, following its progress with his eyes. Sasuke snorted, and looked toward Naruto and Sakura. He seriously doubted Naruto would wait; more likely than not, he would come running onto the scene the first time he or Neji received a punch or kick. And Sakura would follow him, of course. Hell, she would probably beat him into the clearing if Sasuke took the first hit.

"Sakura, Naruto," he said, and drew both of their attention immediately. "*Don't* just rush after the first volley of attacks, regardless of whether or not Neji or I get hit. Wait until we're *out*, understand? You two are meant to cover our backs in this one." He locked gazes with Naruto and when the blonde nodded back, he knew he was safe in their hands.

Sasuke turned back to Neji, ready to head out. But the Hyuuga was watching something with his Byakugan, and the something was making him frown. Sasuke looked around as well, wondering what was worrying him. Then his Sharingan caught sight of something very bizarre.

A small bird, not a foot tall, was watching them intently from a tree branch a few yards off. It didn't appear to be moving, but other than that, it didn't look weird. Except that it was completely a light brownish, no markings or color variations. And its eyes were solid black. Sasuke silently drew a kunai, and noticed that Neji did the same. Sakura had also spotted the bird, and was busying trying to point it out to Naruto.

Then the bird hopped forward, and fluttered over a branch or two closer to them. It was only a few feet away, and Naruto had finally noticed it. It didn't appear to have any markings, or even *feathers* for that matter. In fact, no eyes, either-what appeared to be black was just shadows from two holes in its head.

Two kunai imbedded themselves in the bird's chest instantly. It wobbled for a moment, and another kunai struck it. But then the bird opened its beak, presumably for some sort of warning cry. But no sound came out. It just opened and closed its beaks a few times, completely silent. Neji shook his head, meaning that the enemy Iwa-nin didn't appear to have noticed that they attacked his bird, either.

The bird hopped closer, and Sasuke began his hand signs. If kunai didn't work, he could roast it into oblivion with his *Gokakyuu*. But then the bird took flight, and appeared to be *much* faster than any of them thought. It was only inches from Sasuke's face in less than a second. The Sharingan user jerked back, and raised his hand to finish his signs, but then the bird began to grow.

And then, with no more warning, he felt someone yank him backwards as the bird exploded.

--.-

Neji snarled mentally. He was only close enough to yank Sasuke out of the way of the explosive jutsu. He could only hope that Sakura was smart enough to figure out what was happening early enough to get herself and Naruto out of the way.

Sasuke fell out of the tree and landed in the dirt with a thud, but Neji hit the ground running. That bastard would pay for doing all this. Hinata and the blonde shinobi had both gotten up, and he appeared to be staring right at him, though still only a little less than a kilometer away. Neji would make him pay.

Catfights, Rag Dolls and Shunshin Speed

Deidara awoke with a start. After he had initially kidnapped the Hyuuga, he had taken to letting out a few explosive-clay birds as perimeter scouts. Not that he really expected any pursuers to be dumb enough to set one off, but it was something to do. But now he had heard one go off, and less than a kilometer away as well.

And just as the blonde jerked awake, cursing himself for falling asleep in the first place, he felt an unknown chakra heading toward him—at an alarming speed. The girl had woken up, too, though she had her Byakugan already activated. "Heh, Bya-chan, looks like your knights are here..." Deidara reached into his dwindling clay with one hand, already chewing on it, while making a few half-signs with his other hand to call back his remaining scouts. That would give him roughly four or five—unless these shinobi had managed to disarm some beforehand.

After the signs, Deidara brushed back his hair, and fiddled with the scope covering his eye. He felt more than saw the Hyuuga look at him, but Deidara didn't have time for her curiosity at the moment.

The speedy little shinobi turned out to be another Hyuuga. One with long, dark brown or black hair, and Byakugan fiercely activated. "Bya-chan, I suggest you don't run to their side quite yet. While you're with me, I promise, I won't let my jutsu harm you. But if you join them, I can't promise anything, yeah." He stated calmly, withdrawing as many shuriken as he could hold while his other hand spat out a few miniaturized chakra-enhanced birds and spiders.

And then, the next moment, the dark-haired Konoha-nin burst into the clearing and unleashed a barrage of kunai and shuriken. Deidara countered with his own shuriken, dodging the rest as he jumped into a tree. He discreetly (or at least, he *hoped* it was discreet) dropped two of his birds and his spider into the bush, awaiting his jutsu for later.

And, as always, he popped a bit of his own clay into his mouth, hating the flavor but knowing it could save his life if he needed an exploding getaway. Another swarm of kunai, and this time Deidara just ducked. He tossed the remaining clay bird into the air, quickly activating and enlarging it. With a silent squawk it grew to a size large enough to support his weight, but for now, it just circled. He didn't feel like taking this fight on the road just yet.

The Hyuuga knight took a calm stance, glaring daggers at Deidara. He took that as an invite to attack, and jumped down, a kunai in his mouth and each hand. As long as he kept moving and didn't get hit by that strange chakra-stopping jutsu, this guy wouldn't be a problem. Deidara sped toward him, and swung his hand back—just in time to get thrown back.

His opponent had spun and created some sort of incredibly strong chakra shield, and Deidara jumped back to his feet just in time to see the ending second of it. The Hyuuga smirked, but Deidara just stuck his tongue out in reply, having lost two of his kunai somewhere in his awkward fall. "Shall we finish this before your team catches up, yeah?" Deidara asked, and performed the seals to give life to his birds and spider. The two clay animals took flight and soared toward the dark-haired ninja, and as he predicted, he created another spinning chakra shield.

Just as he stopped, Deidara was on him. He swung his foot in a roundhouse kick, but his ankle was caught. He twisted and tried to punch, but likewise, that fist was stopped. Then the Iwa-nin grinned and brought his other leg up between his opponent's legs. A dirty move, yes, but it was easily blocked; his opponent snarled and jumped into the air, nullifying the kick. But that was just what Deidara wanted.

His large bird caught them both in its mouth and swallowed them.

-.-.-

Hinata 'awoke' to the sound of an explosion. She had been dozing, but just barely, and with her Byakugan activated. Then, the next thing she knew, Deidara was telling her that he promised he wouldn't let any of his attacks harm her, and Neji and he were fighting.

The Hyuuga heir sat rooted to the spot, too shocked at first to do anything except stare. How had her cousin gotten there? It was as if he *teleported*, he was so fast. When had he gotten so fast, or so strong? Neji appeared on par with Deidara, exchanging and blocking blows effortlessly. It was true that nothing could get past his *Kaiten*, and if Deidara slipped even once, his chakra would be blocked with a *Juken*. That much she had proven herself, and Neji was still much more powerful than her (and a jounin).

Then the bird-looking jutsu Deidara created ate them both. She gasped, and her pale eyes went wide. *I don't want either of them eaten—I mean, I don't want Neji-niisan to get eaten!* She thought, and hurriedly amended her worries.

The forest was deathly quiet after the two shinobi got swallowed. Hinata looked around wildly for some way to help; what if that was some sort of suicide move and the bird was digesting them both? Or what if it was suffocating them, or what if it was going to *explode* with them both in it?!

The cobalt-haired girl then saw two things simultaneously with her bloodline limit; the little, clay-colored spider scurrying around impatiently in a nearby bush, and Uchiha Sasuke racing toward the clearing at the edges of her vision. First things first. Hinata jumped up and picked up the spider. It was undoubtedly one of Deidara's, and he would undoubtedly use it against her friends and cousin. She looked around for one of the kunai her kidnapper dropped. The kunoichi vowed to at least take care of this problem herself.

And, for some reason, she wasn't worried that it would detonate while she was holding the squirming arachnid against her chest. (*Deidara said that he wouldn't let any of his attacks hurt me, why would he lie?* a little part of her mind told her happily.) She retrieved a kunai and stabbed the clay creature, but it continued wiggling in her grasp. Her brow furrowed, and Hinata stabbed it again in the head.

Still wiggling.

She experimentally cut off one of its legs, and the clay continued to move on its own, and eventually wormed its way back to rejoin with the body. Hinata despaired, but decapitated it nonetheless. It didn't blow up, at least.

Sasuke broke into the clearing at that time, and she looked up at him. "N-Neji-niisan is in the bird with Deidara-kun and I'm trying to d-disarm this one." The kunoichi explained helplessly, and held up the wiggling, headless spider. The Sharingan user raised an eyebrow, and looked up at the bird, which was slowly circling overhead.

"Seal its chakra." He said simply, and crouched down. The next moment he was gone, and atop the clay bird's head.

Hinata sighed and hung her head; why hadn't she thought of something so simple? She was a

Hyuuga, for Hokage's sake! *I haven't grown any at all since Naruto-kun left...* She scolded herself mentally for a moment, then turned back to the no-longer-beheaded spider. She searched for a moment with her special eyes before locating the jutsu's chakra center. The dark-haired kunoichi channeled just enough chakra into her finger, then prodded the clay right above the spot. The spider went limp, but only for a moment, and then proceeded to increase in size; it was detonating. Hinata panicked, wondering if this was a fail-safe of the jutsu or if she had done something wrong.

But then, just as it started, it stopped.

-.-.-

Deidara had his opponent from the moment the clay engulfed them. A handy feature he had recently introduced to his clay was that it slowly drained chakra from anything touching it (he was still working on it; unfortunately, at this point, it was also draining *his* chakra). Plus, this guy seemed smart. Hopefully he realized that if he blocked his chakra, basically everything would explode. Then again, many shinobi were very into that whole 'kamikaze' style of fighting.

Deidara and his opponent were crammed into the bird, not a foot of space between them. Half a foot of space with two and a half foot arms and half-foot kunai. Both of them were bleeding (*psh, flesh wounds*, Deidara mentally scowled) from practically everywhere, and it appeared as if the Hyuuga was beginning to feel the strain of the chakra drain.

His opponent stabbed him in the shoulder, shoving the blade in up to the hilt. Deidara shrugged it off as another flesh wound, and aimed for his opponent's chest. He was stopped, and tried to knee him in the stomach, but was stopped there as well. Luckily, his opponent only had two hands. And while one of the blonde's own arms was currently pinned to his side from the lack of room and the other leg was holding him up, Deidara had more than one weapon that didn't involve fists.

He headbutted the Konoha-nin, and while the dark-haired man reeled back, shocked at his audacity and pissed off because of the bloody nose it gave him, Deidara reached over and grabbed a fistful of his long, dark brown hair. His opponent looked outraged, and started pulling on his blonde hair as well. A full-out shinobi battle had degraded into a catfight.

Then, somehow, a beam of sunlight cut through into their formerly pitch-black clash. Both ninja stopped the hair-pulling and looked up, to where another enemy shinobi was looking down at them with an incredulous look on his face, a katana in one hand. Deidara's eyes widened when he noticed this shinobi's eyes; they were Sharingan. This was an Uchiha. "Need a hand, Neji?" He asked boredly, as if they weren't trying to kill an S-ranked criminal. The Hyuuga (*his name was Neji?*) gave Deidara's hair another yank, then shook his head.

"You go rescue Hinata-sama. This is nothing but a fool." He stated calmly. It was Deidara's turn to be outraged at his audacity; outright stating their plans and insulting him at the same time?! The nerve!

"I'll show you a fool!" One of the mouths on his hands clamped down on his hair, and pulled out a good-sized lock. Then, Deidara created a hole in the side of his bird, and jumped for it. A split-second later, the clay exploded, and the Iwa-nin landed safely on the ground.

Then he felt another of his clay pieces threatening to explode; he hadn't ordered it to detonate! He formed a quick seal, and the building pressure in his chakra halted, just in time for him to notice

two more chakras rapidly approaching. *And as much as I'd like to work off some excess energy and have something to do, I need to get out of here before that Uchiha decides to take revenge for his Hyuuga friend*, Deidara decided, and placed his fist in his other hand. But the sudden movement reminded him that there was currently an angry kunai imbedded in his shoulder, and it didn't like movement. He grimaced at the pain, and banished it from conscious thought for the moment. First priority: Get his victim and himself out of there before the back-up arrived. Forming the necessary seal for a *Shunshin*, Deidara spotted the female Hyuuga sitting on the other side of the clearing, and leapt deftly over.

Leapt over just in time to come face-to-face with an angry, whiskered blonde.

Deidara jerked his head back to avoid the impromptu headbutt, but likewise the other shinobi did the same. Blue eyes met blue eyes, and the two just stared at each other for a brief moment. Both appeared equally surprised at the other set of eyes suddenly staring at them. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Deidara spotted a fist heading toward his head. He ducked, just in time; *something* was in that punch, because just the air it dragged along behind it was enough to knock him off balance. The missing-nin fell over, and rolled over immediately to avoid the foot that came next.

The stomp created a crater at least two yards across, and the shock of it bounced Deidara into the air as if he were nothing more than a rag doll. And at the moment, that's all he felt like; a rag doll. Whoever the heck was trying to squish him was *very* strong.

Too strong for Deidara to want to hang around any longer. He landed on his feet, and turned, just to experience a feeling of *déjà vu* as he met the same whiskered face and blue eyes again. Without hesitating, Deidara used the only available weapon: the kunai buried in his shoulder. He wrenched it out and stabbed the other blonde—only to have the body disappear in a puff of smoke. "A shadow clone?!" Deidara exclaimed in surprise, and felt the shadows before he saw them. His head whipped back just in time to see it literally *rain* the kid down, all of them with drawn kunai and snarling expressions.

Definitely time to get out of here.

Deidara reached down to his dwindling supply of clay strapped to his leg—and jerked it back as a katana nearly severed his hand. He back flipped away from the Uchiha, cursing the Sharingan and that blade.

"*Rasengan!*" Once again, his head snapped around, and he barely ducked as the real whiskered shinobi charged him. The sheer energy and chakra from the attack made Deidara dizzy.

"*Chidori!*" Deidara swore loudly and performed his *Shunshin* to get away from the loud electrical jutsu. The Uchiha had learned *Chidori*, the blonde had learned *Rasengan*... what the hell was Konoha teaching their kids these days?!

"Shannaro!" Deidara frowned, and wondered what kind of jutsu that was. But as he stood there, he found out that it was just some fancy Konoha word or phrase for a punch; a very, very, *very* strong punch. He stepped aside too late; the fist collided painfully with the back of his shoulder (*the injured one, of course it has to be the injured one!* his mind screeched) and there was a loud crunch. He flew back from the force of the attack, but hit the ground running, back toward where the Hyuuga girl was sitting, wide-eyed and mouth agape.

"*Kaiten!*" He hit the spinning sphere at an angle, and bounced off and into a tree (which made a cracking sound just like his shoulder had). Deidara was starting to feel this battle. The Iwa-nin was completely serious now, as he slowly stood back up and glared at the Hyuuga who had somehow survived.

But these were just a bunch of kids, and he was a missing-nin.

And it didn't hurt that he still had his ace in the hole.

Stealthily creating a clay *bunshin* out of the remains of his largest bird, and having it hide in the forest was easy. So was using a *kawarimi* jutsu to swap places with it. But getting to the cobalt-haired kunoichi was going to take a bit of doing. Having his clay clone attack was easy enough, and hopefully it wouldn't disintegrate before he figured out how to do this; he didn't have enough clay for another. Finally, he decided on another *Shunshin* and hope that the shinobi didn't notice him.

Engaging the speed-enhancing ninjutsu, Deidara darted over and had the Hyuuga girl over his shoulder with and was in the next tree before she noticed. Then his clay clone stated, "Bye-bye, yeah!" No matter how fast those shinobi were, they weren't gonna outrun that. Even with *Shunshin*. (In fact, Deidara was hard-pressed to outrun his own explosion in this instance.)

Then Deidara remembered how much chakra that clay had absorbed.

"Oh, *shit!*" The clone detonated, and he found, even with pouring every ounce of his remaining chakra into his body flicker, he wasn't going to get away from this. His art caught up with him and he just had enough time to shift his victim, using his own body as a shield. (It probably would've been almost romantic under any other circumstances; now it was just survival instincts and the fact that the Hyuuga was a girl.)

Deidara mentally swore that he would never use chakra-draining clay ever again if he lived through this.

Head Back to Konoha

Sasuke woke up to pain. Much, much pain, though it was the aching sort, not the sharp kind that meant he had just been impaled on something again. Onyx eyes slid closed once more, but snapped open only a moment later. *What the... where did the sun go?!*

It was dark. A few stars twinkled in his limited vision of the sky (he appeared to be hanging by the strap of his katana on some tree), and there was no moon he could see. Had he really been out that long?

What the hell happened...? We were fighting that... guy... and then... he exploded... Damn it! Sasuke suddenly felt completely, utterly awake. He remembered everything now.

The bastard had said "Bye-bye, yeah", and then exploded. It was either some sort of *bunshin* or a kamikaze. Sasuke, with his Sharingan, barely had enough time to make a break for it, pumping as much chakra as he could into his legs. And he was still sore, he thought he felt some burns on the backs of his calves, and he distinctly smelled burnt leather (just great, either his sandals or his katana's sheath had melted).

The others would be lucky if they were alive. Sasuke took out one of his few remaining kunai and slit the strap, dropping down to the ground. The pain from the burns was worse than he thought; he stumbled and fell onto his knees. And, as if mocking him, his katana fell hilt-down onto his head, which was more of an annoyance than anything, but Uchiha Sasuke was *not* one to be messed with right now.

He got up, and looked around after retrieving his blade. There was no way he'd be able to use his Sharingan (or legs, it felt like) for awhile now. He staggered over toward the first non-charred-tree thing he saw, and it turned out to be Neji. The Hyuuga genius was lying spread-eagled on his back, but aside from the battle wounds he had sustained before, he didn't appear to be any worse for wear from that last bomb. Sasuke knelt down and roughly shook him awake.

"Neji, get up. Get up, you lazy Hyuuga, up!" He said, and realized how hoarse his own voice sounded. Probably from breathing in whatever scorched air that explosion left. The dark brunette sat up, and looked around with a flat, dazed gaze for a few minutes. "Neji, how the hell did you survive that?"

"*Kaiten*..." He said after a long moment, and appeared to clear his head. He stood up effortlessly, though he apparently *looked* much worse than he felt. His hair had fallen out of his usual loose ponytail, and hung limply around his shoulders. He was covered in scratches and minor burns from the battle before the explosion, and there was a growing bruise near his nose. Blood was crusted on his chin as well, and even after that, Sasuke knew he himself *had* to look worse.

"Can you use the Byakugan?" Sasuke asked quietly, surveying the night for any sign of his friends. Neji shook his head, and the Uchiha sighed. "Looks like we'll have to look for them the old fashioned way..."

Sasuke was more worried about finding remains than anything else, though. If Neji, with his *Kaiten* was that beat up, and he himself with his head start...how would Sakura and Naruto have fared?

Neji cursed himself. Repeatedly, colorfully, and guiltily. He had let the Iwa-nin get away with Hinata-sama *again*, or at least he hoped so; if she was in that, there would be no remains to find. Which was why he was also dreading looking for either of the other two members of the squad. Even if she was a skilled medic-nin, Sakura wouldn't be able to heal such injuries...

The whole forest was gone. Nothing but blackened ground and charred stumps of what had been large, living trees. Nothing but that for *kilometers*.

"Neji, over here..." Sasuke's voice floated over toward him on the night breeze. The pale-eyed jounin looked to where the Uchiha was standing. A barely recognizable, pink-haired form lay on the ground by his feet.

Sakura was still alive, or at least her chest was moving up and down in a slow, regular motion. She was lying on her side, half against a tree, and one leg twisted around it at an impossible angle. One arm appeared severely burned, and it looked as if something had given her a large, deep-looking scratch along her thigh. Sasuke was already trying to rouse her, and Neji noticed the tightness in his voice. "Sakura. Sakura, wake up. Wake up, medic, we need help... Sakura. Sakura... please, wake up."

If Naruto were here, he'd probably say something along the lines of "Why don't you kiss her to wake her up, Prince Charming?" But as the blonde was currently missing in action, Neji decided to leave those two be and search for him. If Sakura was, indeed, alive, then there was a chance for Naruto...

The prodigy closed his eyes, gathered whatever chakra he could, and activated his Byakugan. It stung his eyes, and he sensed that he wouldn't be able to keep this up for long, but it would only take a few moments to locate—*Aha! There he... is...* Neji's thought process slowed drastically.

Naruto was bent over, impaled on a branch several yards to the north. The Byakugan shut itself off automatically, leaving him wide-eyed and struggling to breathe properly. Naruto...who always seemed so energetic, so lively, so determined...one of the only people *ever* to defeat him in battle...

"...Hm...? Sasuke... kun...?" Sakura was awake now, though dazed and in some pain. Sasuke shushed her and quietly told her to heal herself. She instantly protested, more worried about him (and the others, but mostly him) than herself. "Sasuke-kun... no, I'm fine, it's just a broken leg. I'll heal that later... are you injured? Where does it hurt? How is Naruto? Neji?"

"S-Sasuke. Sakura." Neji hated himself for the stutter, and motioned them both over. "I found... Naruto."

All three were soon standing over the blonde, the charred branch sticking out at an angle from his back. Sakura seemed to be crying quietly, but Neji and Sasuke just stared. But then the Uchiha reached over, and sliced the branch off from the trunk cleanly with his katana. He picked Naruto up as if he weighed nothing, and inspected the wound intently, though his eyes appeared glazed over and Sharingan-less. Neji looked away; they deserved the honor of being alone in their grief. (He knew he'd want to be alone if Lee or Tenten died.) Still, the little blonde ball of energy had always been there, ever since those first chuunin exams. They had almost become... friends. The Hyuuga just swallowed, and tried to get rid of the after-ache of using the Byakugan.

"He's breathing."

Sasuke said it so quietly, Neji wasn't even sure he said it at all. Nonetheless, he turned to stare at the dark-haired shinobi. He was staring fiercely at Naruto's back where the branch protruded, as if willing it to extract itself. Then, his eyes faded red, and the pupils rotated slowly. "He's breathing." This time, Neji was positive he had heard him right, as well as Sakura. She gasped softly, putting a gloved hand up to her mouth. "Sakura, we need—"

"Yes!" She expertly laid down the blonde on the ground, and knelt (Neji noticed she winced, but didn't complain) beside him. A few hand signs later, her hands were covered in soothing blue, and she carefully yanked the limb out of his chest. Her green eyes widened slightly, but she continued using her medical jutsu. "...It looks almost as if... he tried to heal himself while the branch was still imbedded in him... the flesh was closed around it... strange..." She furrowed her brow, and concentrated harder. Naruto still wasn't waking up, though he was definitely breathing now, no matter how slowly and weakly.

After what seemed like an eternity (though it was more like three or four agonizing minutes), Sakura leaned back, cut the jutsu off, and hung her head. "I... I can't do anything more for him. His body was somehow healing itself, and it healed wrong. I can't fix it... only Tsunade-shishou could." She looked up at the two shinobi, and her gaze hardened. "We need to head back to Konoha."

Both looked like they were about to protest, but then, *somehow*, the blonde managed to. "...N-no... n-n-need... to catch... Hi-Hinata..." Naruto stated, matter-of-factly, as if he wasn't laying there dying. His eyes remained closed, but he had definitely spoken. The other three stared at him for a moment, then Sakura ran another diagnostic jutsu over his body, wondering how he could've managed to talk in his state.

"I can't believe it...! How he could've spoken... he shouldn't have... Sasuke-kun! We *need* to get him back to Konoha! Now!" She exclaimed, and her jutsu faded. She hurriedly healed her own broken leg, and stretched it for a few seconds to test it out, then gently picked up Naruto as if he were nothing more than a twig.

Naruto coughed weakly, and there was the liquid sound of blood splattering the ground. Neji winced. He wouldn't last long... But at the same time, what about Hinata? His mind—and heart—were torn. Go against orders, common sense and Naruto? Or go against his heart and abandon Hinata?

Sasuke, strangely, looked similarly torn.

-.-.-

Damn it... so close to finding the Akatsuki... that bastard, blowing up like that... Sasuke silently fumed. He felt as if he needed to punch something, *now*. *That idiot... healing himself with a tree stuck in him... why?!*

"Sasuke... bastard..." On cue, the whiskered blonde coughed again, and spoke slowly. Sakura half-heartedly glared at the Uchiha, as if it was *his* fault Naruto was forcing himself to speak. "...D-Don't... give up... ever..." Sasuke's gaze softened. His best friend was dying, and he was still encouraging him to continue the mission.

That statement also seemed to affect Sakura. She slowly nodded to herself, then turned to the Sharingan user. "Sasuke-kun... Neji... Tsunade-shishou will take care of Naruto. I'll take him to her. You two... go on. Follow Hinata and the Iwa-nin. I'll tell shishou that we got separated, alright?" Sakura smiled, even though her cheeks were still tear-stained. "I can see it in your eyes. You want to follow them. I... I'm not going to stop you two. But now... you won't have a medic-nin. Or the world's most hyperactive ninja to cover your back."

Sasuke stared at her. He was surprised, but also somewhat (and somehow) touched, that she was willing to do this for them. He knew full well that Neji was hell-bent on chasing after his cousin, and he himself was also just as determined to get to the Akatsuki. Sometimes he was surprised just *how* deeply she really cared for him, and almost felt guilty about it...

"...Thank you." Neji bowed stiffly, but gratitude shone in his white eyes.

Sasuke, likewise, nodded, and did an awkward sort of half-bow. "Yeah... thanks... Sakura." He also offered a small smile of appreciation at this random act of kindness. "And... take care of the idiot, alright...?" He added softly, looking down at the blonde.

Naruto, surprisingly, was the one who answered. "...Bas... tard..." Sakura shushed him, then carefully placed him in a the standard shinobi position for carrying wounded comrades. She disappeared without another word, but not without a shy smile at Sasuke.

Sasuke only glanced at Neji, who nodded in return. *Sakura, I swear, if I get Itachi because of this, I will go on as many dates as you'd like*, he vowed mentally. It was the best he could think of, and the one that would probably be most appreciated by her, short of actually marrying her. (Then again, he probably wouldn't marry her if she handed him Itachi's head on a silver platter. He considered them too good of friends to actually create a serious relationship.)

Plus, he wanted the joy of taking down the Akatsuki himself.

Not in Heaven

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the idea of 'Shannaro no Jutsu'. I do not own Naruto, Sasuke, Hinata, Deidara, Neji, Tsunade, or any of the other characters featured in this story. They all belong to Masashi Kishimoto. I am using none of these with permission and hope to God that the owners forgive me.

Hinata awoke to a half moon shining onto her face. She opened her eyes slowly, and abstractly appreciated the cool night breeze on her face. She felt sore, for some reason, and she didn't remember ever falling asleep. The kunoichi slid open her eyes halfway, surveying the beautiful night sky. The stars were pretty.

Too bad no one is here to share this nice night with me, she thought sadly, and noticed she was lying on her back. For some reason, one of her arms felt warmer than the other, too. Just turning her head demanded a great amount of energy, but she managed it.

Her sleeve appeared to have completely disintegrated, revealing raw and burned skin underneath. She decided that that arm hurt.

Hinata closed her eyes again, and tried to remember just *why* she hurt. Or *why* she had fallen asleep, or why her arm was burned, or why her mind felt very, very muddled... *Something... something about... a... fire. Yes... there was a fire. And something... exploded, yeah*, she thought slowly, and a few disjointed scenes of memories came back to her. Her cousin... and (was his name Deidara?) a blonde were fighting... She was playing with a clay spider... but nothing about any fires.

Huh, that's odd... A few more scenes; Naruto using his *Rasengan* against... Deidara. (Yes, that was his name, wasn't it?) So what were Naruto and Neji both doing attacking him? Didn't they like each other? Sasuke was there, too, for some reason... he was holding a sword of some sort, he was a very skilled swordsman, too...

What were all of them doing there? Hm, I wonder why they were all fighting... I'm tired... I think I should go back to sleep now... But a rather painful throb in her arm kept her awake. Hinata continued to let her mind wander aimlessly instead. *Hmm, hmm, let's see... "Bya-chan"... I wonder who that is. I think... it's me... I wonder why someone called me that. Didn't Deidara call me that? Why did he... because he doesn't know my name, that's right...*

Hinata slowly sat up, and realized that her whole body was stiff and sore and achy, not just her arm. The pale-eyed chuunin looked around boredly.

A blonde-haired figure was lying beside her, only a foot or so away. *That's... Deidara*, Hinata decided mentally, and turned a bit as to face him. He was laying on his side, hair out of its half-ponytail and falling around his shoulders and face freely. His face was almost completely hidden by his hair, so Hinata reached over with her good hand and absently brushed it away. She cocked her head slightly, fingers running over the cool metal of the scope.

That's odd. I wonder what that is... She thought, and brushed all of his hair out of his face. Over

his eye, the one that was always hidden (*Yes, that's right, he usually keeps his hair in his face.*), there was some sort of device. It had a lens over it; was it some sort of sight-enhancing machine? She prodded it a few times, but when it did nothing, she lost interest. *My head hurts, I wonder if I hit it on something during the fall... Hm, I wonder what fall...*

"U-um... Deidara-kun?" She tried out her voice. Her throat didn't hurt too much, but her voice sounded weaker than normal. "Deidara-kun...? C-Could you please, um, wake up and tell me what happened...?" He didn't move, so she gently poked him. He still didn't move.

She then noticed that there was little bits of something in his hair, and reaching up, she noticed that the same stuff appeared in her hair. Hinata frowned, and combed her fingers through her dark locks, pulling out bits of what appeared to be hardened... clay.

Clay. Pale eyes stared at it, and Hinata began to remember. *Clay. Deidara-kun uses clay, he was using it against Neji-niisan and Naruto-kun and Sasuke and Sakura-san, that spider I was messing with was a clay one... Oh my goodness, that's right!* Her mind went into overdrive. "Oh my... Deidara-kun exploded! He rescued me but—oh! What about Neji-niisan?! And the others?! Oh no, oh no..." The Hyuuga closed her eyes, and summoned whatever leftover chakra she had. Reopening them with the Byakugan activated, she searched out desperately for any sign of either her cousin, or of Naruto, or either Sakura or Sasuke.

Nothing. The whole forest seemed to have disappeared, leaving nothing but soot and a large crater. Subconsciously she wondered just *how much* chakra Deidara had... But outwardly she was still worried about the lack of rescuers, or rescuer-bodies. She also observed with her all-seeing eyes that Deidara's chakra circulation was weak and slow. (She was partly amazed that he even had any chakra left.) "Maybe... maybe Deidara-kun could help me..." It was a stretch, she knew, that he'd help her look for her friends. But then again, this whole kidnapping had been unorthodox from the start.

Then a wave of realization came over her. Deidara was out cold, and even if he did wake up again, it wouldn't be for a *long* time. She wasn't very hurt, and she knew enough medical jutsu to survive. Hinata could just go on her merry way and try to find her knights. (*Why am I calling them that? her mind demanded her subconscious.*) But... he'd surely die, with chakra that low, and looking closer, Hinata began to notice several more injuries.

His left shoulder was a mess, caked over with drying blood and open rather gruesomely. (*Neji-niisan stabbed him with a kunai there, didn't he, she remembered vaguely. And then Deidara-kun took it out to try to attack Naruto-kun with it... but it was a Kage Bunshin...*) Either the mothering instincts in her or the kindness in her was forcing her to assess the damage done to her kidnapper's body. In addition to the kunai wound, the arm's bone was nearly completely shattered. He had several minor scratches, bruises and burns covering his body, but they were nothing but nuisances compared to his shoulder.

And there was something... strange in the way the chakra around his heart was acting. It was jerky, and slow, and she wondered if Neji had managed to score a hit with his *Juken* after all... But then Hinata remembered that it was *her*, not her cousin, that did that. (*Back when he first tried to kidnap me, wasn't it? her mind asked guiltily.*) The damage to his heart was probably the reason his chakra was acting so bizarre.

Of course, the guilt forced her decision in the other direction. She couldn't just leave him here. Even if he did survive, without some proper medical attention, he'd die within the week from internal damage. Why hadn't he said something to her about that? Then again, why would he? *I'm the one who did that to him, after all... Wait, why am I feeling sorry and remorseful? He*

kidnapped me, he brought it on himself, didn't he...? Hinata was torn. On one hand, she should search for her comrades and try to get back to Konoha. On the other hand, Deidara really *had* been kind to her thus far, and he had protected her from his jutsu like he'd promised...

She really should just leave him there; every shinobi instinct she had ever learned was screaming at her to leave him there, or slit his throat and leave his body. But at the same time, her personality was fighting with the shinobi in her; *He's defenseless! He's weakened! He won't last a week!*

Hinata whimpered, hung her head, and wondered what she was going to do. (Because now that she thought of it, there were even *more* options for her to choose from. She could heal him but bring him back to Konoha for questioning, she could kill him, she could just die from the pressure of this decision herself.)

But then, the little part of her mind that was sly, cunning and rather twisted at times told her the perfect plan.

-.-.-

Deidara opened his eyes slowly. Everything was dark and fuzzy, but when the world slid back into focus, there was a dark-haired girl with white eyes staring down at him worriedly. "...Why the hell am I in heaven... yeah...?" He asked groggily, and actually meant it; he was sure he had died. Why, he had no idea. But it felt as if he should be dead right now, not either alive or in heaven with this pale-eyed angel staring at him.

The explosives expert sat up, and instantly regretted it. Regretted it *loudly* with a yelp as he clutched his shoulder and flopped back onto his back. The pain banished any thoughts other than being alive from his mind. It also cleared his mind to an icy clarity. "Ow! Ow, owowowowowie! Jeez, Bya-chan, what happened, yeah?!" He writhed a bit, his body not-so-calmly telling him that holding his shoulder in a death grip was painful.

"H-Hold still..." Deidara obediently froze, but then frowned slightly. Had the Hyuuga said that? Why was she talking to him now? What if it was someone else who said that...? His paranoia suddenly took over, and convinced him that he had been taken to Konoha or some other village for questioning and torture while he was out cold. Ignoring the pain like a good shinobi, Deidara jumped to his feet, muscles tense as he glared around.

"...Wait. This isn't Konoha, yeah..." He said simply, perplexed. This was nothing but charred and demolished forest, compliments of *his* art. The blonde couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride at the massive destruction he'd caused. Deidara felt dizzy, and looked down at his injured shoulder. It was a bloody mess, and a few minutes too late, he realized that the blood loss was making him too dizzy to stand. He fell over gracelessly, unfortunately back onto his bad shoulder. He was up again in a heartbeat, howling at the accidental self-inflicted torture, and fell over onto his other side. He laid there, whining and bemoaning his stupid body for getting itself hurt.

"D-Deidara-kun...! Pl-Pl-Please, h-hold still..." That voice again. Deidara would've rolled over to look at her, trying to match the voice with the face if it was her, but his let's-not-feel-any-more-pain instincts forbade him. Instead, he just curled up into a ball and continued muttering darkly about his shoulder.

An upside-down face appeared in his vision. The Hyuuga kunoichi was leaning over him, upside-

down, to look at him. Deidara wondered if he was delirious, or this was some sort of twisted genjutsu. "Bya-chan?" He asked, raising his eyebrow. She squeaked and instantly reddened; this was definitely his victim. But why was she helping him?

"H-Hold s-s-st-still..." She stammered, and quickly moved out of his vision. He heard something move, and then, miraculously, his shoulder started to feel better. Ignoring her orders, he rolled over onto his back to stare at her. She squeaked again; he had rolled onto her lap. The kunoichi just sat there, eyes wide and face getting progressively redder until Deidara thought she'd explode. He mentally shrugged and turned back over onto his side.

"Bya-chan, why are you healing me?" He asked when he felt the relief that medical jutsu brought on his shoulder again. No reply. Had she given up talking that quickly? "Hmm... why am I not in Konoha, yeah, being interrogated? Why aren't your knights coming to kick my a—I mean, why aren't they here to capture me? Why aren't I in he—heck, yeah?" The blonde asked plaintively, while his shoulder was realizing that in addition to the bloody mess-pain, there was a dull-pain underneath. Probably from that Shannaro no Jutsu.

The sting from the kunai wound gradually disappeared completely, though the ache still remained. He had a sneaking suspicion that something was broken. And, strangely enough, he was beginning to feel all of the little injuries (scratches, bruises, burns, itches, and one really annoying, slightly painful trickle of blood that had worked its way into his eye while he was laying there). That had never happened to him before; usually they were either healed by a medic-nin or Deidara just ignored them. But he couldn't seem to ignore them all now.

And even stranger, that strange ache in his chest that he'd had for the past few days was gone. Just *what* kind of medical skills did this Hyuuga have?

"Bya-chan, what are you doing to me, yeah? Not that I don't mind it, 'cause I don't... but why are you healing me? Save your chakra for yourself first, shinobi rule number... um..." He couldn't remember which shinobi rule that was, but he remembered that it only applied to non-medic shinobi. *Was* she a medic-nin? And even more annoying, she didn't seem to be talking to him any more. "Bya-chan... I think I'm delirious, yeah."

She either ignored him or just couldn't think of a reply to that, and he felt the broken bones in his arm mending themselves. He decided that she really wasn't a medic-nin; depleted chakra or not, he had never had a medic take this long just healing a broken bone. She probably had some medic friends or something and just learned the basics. Well, good for her, then.

So Itachi and Haku Walk Into A Bar

Neji had actually thought they stood a chance of finding them that night. After all, that Iwa-nin (Deidara?) couldn't have woken up that much sooner than them, and he was still traveling with Hinata...at least, Neji still *hoped* that he had Hinata with him. It was a strange wish, but there was no way Hinata would've been able to survive that without either teleportation skills or *Kaiten*. And as far as he knew, she had neither.

Damn it... if I hadn't been so arrogant, if I would've let Sasuke help me kill him, none of that would have happened, the genius cursed, and vowed that he wouldn't let his confidence get in the way of his fighting ever again. (As well as: he would never underestimate clay again. But what was he supposed to think at the time? Jutsu or not, it was squishy and mud. Even if it did explode.)

Instead, he focused his rage on thinking out a strategy, or perhaps counter-strategy. *He utilizes explosives... He seems to focus more on speed and strategy than brute strength... Clay! He needs clay! He's going to need more clay after that... He will need to either stop for supplies; there aren't any rivers near here.* Neji couldn't help but smirk at this tidbit he'd discovered. *The nearest non-shinobi village is...* And his mind drew a blank. The Hyuuga glanced at the Uchiha running beside him (they decided to forgo the branches for the next few days; no telling how weakened the trees in the remains of the forest were after that bomb went off), and glared off in the opposite direction. He would *not* ask him for help on something as trivial as this.

"...Neji... do you know the name of the nearest non-shinobi village?" Sasuke asked hesitantly, and the Hyuuga frowned slightly. So he had come to the same conclusion as him in the same amount of time...

"No. I do not. But I do know the location of it." He replied stiffly. The Sharingan user nodded, as if in agreement, and they both angled their traveling path slightly, heading toward the unnamed village.

-.-.-

It was dawn of the *next* day before they found it. Apparently neither genius was willing to admit that they really didn't know the exact location of it. Which meant that Hinata and Deidara could've easily already gotten supplies and left, or infiltrated the village without being detected. Sasuke wordlessly took off his hitai-ate, stowing it in his shuriken bag. They were out of the Country of Fire and had no real way of telling how friendly the ties with this country were.

Neji removed his headband as well, and glanced uneasily at the outskirts of the town. Sasuke was thinking the same thing; *Someone is bound to recognize him as a Hyuuga, even without the bandages covering his forehead...* The pale eyes and dark hair were always a dead giveaway. But at the same time, it meant that Hinata was in the same boat as her cousin.

"Close your eyes, cover your face with your hair as much as you can, and activate your Byakugan." Sasuke muttered out of the corner of his mouth. (He, too, couldn't be recognized, so that meant no Sharingan.)

"Fine. What are we masquerading as if not shinobi?" Neji replied back, just as stiffly as he untied

his hair and let it fall freely into his face. It completely covered the bandages over his cursed seal, and mostly concealed his closed eyes. But the main worry was the enlarged veins around his eyes; they could pass off everything *but* the Byakugan. Sasuke thought about it for a moment, then shifted his katana in his arms.

"Mercenaries. Swordsman and a thug." Without the strap tying the blade to his back, the Uchiha looked a bit unprofessional, but at the same time, just their movements would easily giveaway their strength and experience. That was the thing about shinobi; you could usually pick one out in a moving crowd no problem.

Neji's mouth twitched at being called a mere thug. "How about this, Uchiha: you be a samurai and I've hired you to be my bodyguard. I can easily pretend to be some rich crime lord or something." He smirked, and added under his breath, "I've had practice." Sasuke glared half-heartedly at him, but nodded. As long as they could search the village without getting caught.

"We need names." The wanna-be samurai shifted his katana again, hating having to carry it. They'd also need to stop for some supplies. Neji nodded stiffly, and both geniuses scoured their memories and intellect for suitable aliases. Unfortunately, Sasuke was horrible with names.

"...I will be..." Neji appeared to be trying hard not to grin. "Remember, you will need to address me as '-sama', Sasuke. I hired you."

"...I know." He replied tightly, and wondered where he was going. Either it was something incredibly mean or incredibly stupid. (Neji probably wasn't that creative with names, either.)

"Then you shall call me Uzuki Itachi. Itachi-sama will do." Sasuke tried hard not to throttle him.

"I am Hyuuga Haku... Itachi-sama. The surname is just a coincidence."

"No, you can't use Hyuuga. Can't you use anything else, Uchiha?!" Neji hissed at him, but he didn't sound nearly as annoyed or angry as Sasuke.

"It's either that or Momochi Zabuza. I dislike creating names for aliases."

The two continued bickering, though the complete argument was under their breath. It sounded more like a steady stream of hissing. But by the time they reached the real city limits, they had decided on Uzuki Itachi (Sasuke swore he would *get him back* for that) and Haruno Haku. Apparently geniuses lacked the creativity needed to create proper fake names.

They forced themselves to walk calmly through the village, while Neji, even behind closed eyes, searched desperately for his cousin and her kidnapper. (Sasuke-Haku had to wonder how creepy that would be, to see through your eyelids.) But it was also Sasuke's job to glare down anyone who dared look at them, trying to look as non-shinobi menacing as possible.

They stopped at a weapons shop, and unfortunately it was Neji who had to barter for a new strap for his samurai's katana. "Sir. I would like to purchase a new sheath and a holding strap for this blade." He held out his hand, and, gritting his teeth, Sasuke obediently handed over his favorite weapon. "Is that possible?"

He and the storekeeper chatted mundanely while the man inspected the blade. He told them that it would be possible, but it would take the afternoon. As Neji turned to look at Sasuke, he hissed, "Leather," out of the corner of his mouth.

"I would also prefer it to be made out of leather. More durable." He returned to the shopkeeper, and smiled tightly. "Isn't that right, Haku-san?" Sasuke resisted the urge to glare at him.

"Yes... Itachi-sama."

-.-.-

Neji was enjoying this whole fake-names business. It was a chance for him to get revenge for not being able to go on ahead by himself to take out the Iwa-nin. And it was just plain entertaining to watch Sasuke try to restrain himself.

But unfortunately, a sheath and strap made out of leather would take all night. So he and his hired help would have to book a hotel. But it would also give them more time to search. First, they struck out for a room for the night at the nearest hotel; they weren't picky.

The two had to wait behind a rather pretty blonde in a pink kimono at the hotel's desk. Neji only glanced at her, though; he never was much for women, and (it must have been his Hyuuga blood), he generally judged people on their eyes. Her back was to them the whole time, so he didn't even get a chance to look at her face. But when she passed them, probably on her way to her new room, Neji caught the smell of blood. He did a subtle double take with his Byakugan, and wondered if she was an undercover kunoichi.

Or maybe it was that time of the month.

He struggled not to make a face at that stray thought, and rigidly stood in front of the woman behind the counter. "A room for the night. Two beds." He had been on one too many embarrassing missions where whoever got the hotel room failed to specify how many beds.

But then they encountered their first snag. As shinobi, they usually just had to show their hitai-ates at the front desk to get a room. But as undercover shinobi, they didn't have that luxury.

Unfortunately, they didn't have the luxury of much money, either. Sasuke was already reaching into his bag to retrieve the headband, but Neji stopped him before the woman noticed. "...Can you reserve a room, and when we come back pay? You need not give us the key until we pay." He asked, and noticed the strange look she gave him. (It probably was weird, his hair hanging in his face and eyes closed, but managing to stand right in front of her and face her.)

"Yes, but only for one hour, sir." The woman nodded at him, and the two depart.

"Now what? We have an hour to make enough money for a hotel room and what about my katana?!" Sasuke snarled at him as they step foot into the morning sunlight. "We still need to pay for that, too!"

"That is no way to talk to your employer." Neji replied calmly, but was thinking something along the same lines. "Don't you have any skills that could earn us some money?"

"Nothing, since we can't use our jutsu." Sasuke scowled darkly, trying to fend off any people looking at him, but instead a group of girls just giggled and blushed as he passed. "Unless you want me to whore myself out to—NO." Neji tried hard not to smirk, but the thoughtful expression he had pasted on his face worked well enough. "I will kill you if you try."

"Fine, fine, no need to get so angry, *Haku-san*." The Hyuuga put careful emphasis on his name; Sasuke was getting out of character.

"... Yes, Itachi-sama." He replied sullenly, and jammed his hands in his pockets. "So what about

you... *sir*? Gee, I bet you could make a killing telling fortunes." He said sarcastically, rolling his black eyes.

Hell, if either of us could use our jutsu we could make a killing, Neji thought sourly. We have one hour... we need a quick way to make enough money to pay for both a hotel room and a leather sheath; later we'll be too busy searching to earn money...

Their time limit was passing, and neither one could think of anything they were willing to do. Eventually it was decided that this time Sasuke would talk to the woman, try to wrangle a hotel room out of her with his charm. (As for the sheath, they just decided to take it, or find a way to put it on someone else's bill.) "We have a half hour left. Think, genius, *think*." Neji hissed, more to himself than to Sasuke.

But the Uchiha had stopped, and was watching something with a small smirk on his face. Neji didn't need to turn his head to look; his Byakugan showed him that it was some sort of side show. A man took a drink of something, then held up a stick, and when he breathed out, he breathed *fire*.

Perfect.

Five minutes later, after a trip to a local bar to buy a bottle of sake (Sasuke had told him quite colorfully that he was *not* putting gasoline in his mouth, because gas plus his *Gokakyuu* equaled leveled town), Neji was busy degrading himself by calling passerby to watch the amazing fire-breathing. Of course, Sasuke just enjoyed some sake before discreetly making the seals for his fire jutsu. He barely had to expend any chakra to create a well-sized fireball over the awed crowd's head.

Neji walked around them and collected as much money from the spectators as he could. Counting it as he went, he was amazed that they already had half of what they needed, and with roughly fifteen minutes left to get back to the hotel. But then, he also discovered that people weren't nearly as keen on paying the second time than as the first time they watched the *Gokakyuu*.

Slowly the crowd dispersed, and Sasuke looked tired of using the same jutsu over and over. Five minutes left on the clock, Neji just figured that the Uchiha would have to sacrifice himself to a date to make up the rest of the hotel's fee. (How did normal people manage to make money for hotels?!) Both shinobi stomped back to the building with not nearly enough money or dignity to be comfortable.

But a pleasant surprise was waiting for them. Apparently someone had already paid for their room, though the woman at the desk wouldn't divulge who. It was pleasant until normal ninja paranoia took over, anyway. They both entered the room with bloodline limits blazing and kunai drawn. (Though Neji kept his Byakugan carefully suppressed to just this room; he did *not* want to see what other people (primarily couples) were doing in their rooms.)

The room turned out to be just a normal hotel room, even under the next hour of careful shinobi scrutiny. "Come, we've wasted enough time looking for traps that aren't here. Maybe one of your many admirers decided to buy you a room." Neji sighed, and glanced at Sasuke. He just shrugged and let his Sharingan fade back into black. "We need to resume searching for Hinata-sama. And frankly... I need a drink."

They agreed only an hour in the bar, but they both got drunk rather quickly and the one hour turned into three. Sasuke remembered that his friends always told him he was a friendly drunk (Neji seemed to be the moody kind), but he didn't see anything wrong with holding a conversation. With about four different, pretty girls at once.

Neji said something, but Sasuke didn't hear him over his girls' giggling. Instead, he just ordered another round for them, but Neji grabbed him by the arm and literally dragged him out of the bar. "Ack! Nooooo, ladies, I'll be back for you!" The Uchiha shouted as his partner slammed the door behind them. "Neji, why'd you do that?"

"I don't... I don't see why Sakura doesn't get you drunk more often..." He just muttered, and Sasuke realized that his walking was *very* unsteady. But then again, at least he retained his balance; Sasuke was still leaning against him and being dragged rather limply. "We need to, uh, find Hinata... Yeah..." Neji nodded to himself, and tried to wipe his long hair out of his eyes while supporting the Uchiha at the same time. The result was that both of them fell over in the middle of the road. Neither drunk genius seemed to remember how to stand up.

Several people (some of them just as drunk as they, it seemed) walked by, but none of them offered to help them up. Sasuke was laughing hysterically while trying to form the hand signs for his *Gokakyuu*, gasping out something like "Hahaha, BURN, haha, burn them, hee-hee, I'ma gonna burn them!" (Evidently he was a sadistic, affectionate drunk.) Neji tried to stagger to his feet again, when he spotted someone vaguely familiar. A blonde head attached to a pink kimono.

"Hey! Hey, uh... pink lady...!" Neji called, and she jumped, and turned to face him. The Hyuuga stared at her for a moment, and she stared back, blue eye wide. The first thing he realized was that he had seen her before. And the second was that she was a he.

On The Run Again

Deidara had realized early-on that he needed more clay. And he hadn't come across a river for a few days, either. The blonde has asked the Hyuuga where the nearest village was, explaining that they either needed food, soldier pills, or antidote in case he had to cook.

He didn't mention that the main reason was the lack of medium for his art. She was hesitant enough to divulge the location of the nearest village, though she also said that it wasn't in the Country of Fire. (Deidara was also trying to get her to keep talking; her voice made him happy.)

Getting to the town only took a few hours on foot, and Deidara was still in good spirits when they reached the outskirts. The kunoichi looked uncomfortable, though, and kept blinking rapidly, as though trying to hide her eyes. "Oh... hey, right. Hyuuga. You wanna use a *Henge*, Bya-chan?" He asked, but she just shook her head. "But... right... yeah. Disguises. Give me your hitai-ate, Bya-chan." She looked almost angry at him, and shook her head again. Deidara frowned, and held out his hand. "You can't walk around with a Konoha hitai-ate around your neck, yeah. Give me the headband."

"N-No..." She whispered faintly, and she reached back to tighten the knot. Deidara wondered why the heck she wouldn't give it up.

"I'm not asking any more, Bya-chan. You can't be recognized as a Konoha kunoichi. Give me that headband, yeah!" He demanded, though he doubted he could back himself up, with that adorable pout she was giving him. She shook her head once more, and Deidara decided he needed to show some force if he wanted to stay in charge of this situation. "I'm giving you to the count of three. One... Two... Two and a half... Three!" The blonde full-out lunged at her, but she just squeaked, backed up a step, and next thing he knew, her palm tapped his chest, and he felt his chakra system fail. He staggered away from her, wondering how the heck he let her do that to him again.

She just stared at him, almost defiantly.

"You're *so* lucky I didn't have any more clay, yeah." Deidara stuck out his tongue at her, and waved his arms experimentally. They felt numb, but he still had movement in them. "...Of course, now, Bya-chan, I can't use a *Henge* on myself. It's going to look awfully strange that a missing Iwa-nin and a Konoha-nin are hanging out in this village..."

"Y-You take off y-your h-hi-hitai-ate, then..." She replied softly.

"I was planning on it, yeah." Deidara said dryly, now testing his legs. "So then... dress-up time." The Hyuuga raised an eyebrow and looked at him blankly. "We still need disguises, don't we?"

Hinata could *not* believe she was doing this. She was peeking over a fence as Deidara tip-toed over to a clothesline, where several shirts and a kimono were hanging. (*What kind of person hangs a kimono out to dry, anyway, she wondered.*) She couldn't believe that they were reduced to petty thievery to get into a non-shinobi village.

It was even more embarrassing when Deidara picked out the pink kimono. He folded it carefully

over his arm and ran back toward her. The blonde jumped the fence with a grin, and kept running. Hinata looked torn between following him and leaving some sort of apology note for the unfortunate owners.

But when there was a screech of "HEY, YOU!", Hinata decided to run for it, too.

She met him back at the edge of the forest, panting slightly and looking at him reproachfully. "Th-that was mean..." She said quietly, but he didn't appear to notice. He held up the pink kimono and grinned. Hinata pouted and told him, "I-I'm not wearing th-that, Deidara-kun..."

"I know. We'll head to another house for your outfit." Hinata's jaw dropped. *He* was wearing *that*? He appeared to have noticed her expression, because Deidara calmly added, "Yes, I am wearing this, yeah. You'll see why."

There is a reason behind it? the pale-eyed kunoichi turned beet-red and hurriedly looked away. They also fetched a lavender kimono for her, but only after searching for nearly an hour. Deidara insisted on lavender; he said it matched her eyes. She just blushed again, and still kept wondering what his reasoning was.

"Alright, Bya-chan. Here's the plan. We're sisters in law—don't look at me that way, yeah!" Hinata was *not* pretending to have *Deidara* for a sister. Her kidnapper just looked dejectedly at her. "Alright, fine. Watch this." She watched him warily, but he only appeared to be trying to forcefully start his chakra circulation again. He managed, but it was still at a level that he couldn't manage a *Kawarimi*, much less a *Henge*. Nonetheless, he made a few hand signs, and grinned quite evilly at her.

Then, without saying a word, he reached up and undid the hair tie keeping his blonde hair up, and allowed the rest of it to fall down. He batted his eyes at her and said, in a *very* feminine voice, "How about now, Bya-chan?"

"Th-Tha-That j-jutsu...!" She gasped, and stared at him with an incredulous expression. Deidara just beamed at her.

"Yup! A voice-changing jutsu. I invented this particular one, to annoy all the guys back at Iwa... Ah... good times, good times, yeah..." Hearing Deidara speak in a voice that was girlier than her own was definitely strange. But what was even stranger was that he actually *looked* like a girl—albeit a flat-chested, skinny one. Hinata had never noticed how feminine he looked, she supposed. "But see, Bya-chan? One simple jutsu and I have an unbeatable disguise! Mostly because there really isn't any genjutsu to dispel if we're caught. And I'll just stuff something into that kimono for some fake cleavage. I'll still be rather flat, especially compared to *you*, Bya-chan, but I think we'll get through this, yeah."

He did not just say that, her mind screeched. She turned so red so fast it actually made her dizzy, and for a brief moment, she was worried she'd faint. Even worse, when she looked back over him, he was shirtless and currently trying to get his kimono on. Then she really did faint.

-.-.-

Deidara looked back over when he heard a thump. Giving up on the kimono for now (he would *never* figure out how to put those things on), he noticed that his victim had fainted. The blonde

blinked, then leaned over to inspect her. "...Bya-chan?" Her face was a dark red, and she appeared to have passed out. He looked down at himself, currently half naked. Then he grinned, and stated, "I still got it, yeah!" before reaching over to shake her awake.

She didn't wake up, so Deidara decided to make things easier for her and finished changing and getting his oh-so-awesome disguise ready. When she finally did awaken, almost a half hour later, she did a double-take. "D-Deidara-kun...?" He just grinned triumphantly, and nodded.

"Yup! Although you should call me Dei-chan, yeah. More feminine... I think. And *you* to change now, Bya-chan." The explosives expert stared at her, while she was busy staring at the fake chest he gave himself. (She looked like she twitched a bit, and was rapidly progressing toward I'm-turning-so-red-I'm-gonna-faint again.) Instead, Deidara waved his hand (with the mouth smiling and sticking out its tongue) in front of her face, looking for a reaction. "Bya-chan, yeah! You need to change, 'cause we need to get into that village! Unless you want to eat my cooking, yeah..."

The Hyuuga kunoichi looked up at his face (finally), still red and looking unsure. He held out the kimono for her, and she took it. Then, after a few awkward moments, she stammered, "U-uh, pl-pl-p-please l-l-loo-look a-away...?"

He only looked at her, confused. But then brightened, and exclaimed (apparently a bit too loudly for her tastes, as she flinched and turned even redder), "Oh! Since you're an *actual* kunoichi, you probably don't wanna get stared at, huh? Don't worry, Bya-chan. I'll just go over here, yeah." He (even though he knew he looked remarkably like a she) walked over a ways, after picking up his backpack containing the still-disgusting severed head. (Luckily, it didn't look like the jutsu keeping it from rotting dispelled. He probably would've given up if he had to lug around a rotting, severed head.)

Several awkward minutes later, Deidara thought she had run away when he heard a faint "U-um, I-I-I'm r-ready..." He turned around, and was about to reply when he saw her. The cobalt-haired, kimono-clad kunoichi looked beautiful, pure and simple. Instead of saying something, he just stared shamelessly, mouth agape. She blushed, when a mumbled request to stop staring went unheard, she apparently decided she needed to forcefully stop him from staring at her.

Engaging her Byakugan, the Konoha-nin frowned for a moment, then softly tapped him in the stomach once more. Deidara let out a sound that could be described as nothing else but a squawk, and jumped back as his voice jutsu failed him. "Bya-chan! *Now* what am I gonna do, yeah?"

She almost looked apologetic, but just offered a small shrug instead of outright remorse.

Eventually, they decided that they couldn't wait (after his stomach growled rather loudly and insistently), and that the Hyuuga would have to do the talking. But they also had to hide her pale eyes; they were a giveaway for her clan. A *Henge* wouldn't work, since there would probably be shinobi around, wondering why a Konoha-nin was using genjutsu. "If you wouldn't have blocked my chakra *again*, I probably would've been able to think of something, yeah." Deidara stated dryly, but as it was, he just fiddled around with his backpack's strap. It felt heavier with his clothes in there, and he was dreading to see how much blood they'd have after getting them away from the Akatsuki member's head.

But then, something came to him. He looked down at his feet (still wearing his ninja sandals, but what the heck), and scuffed them in the dry dirt. "If we can't change your eyes, yeah..."

Hinata was nervous. How was she supposed to spy on him (and the Akatsuki, if they managed to get that far) if they didn't even make it through this minor obstacle? Some kunoichi she turned out to be. They had stolen some poor woman's kimonos just to fail now. The heiress hung her head dejectedly, but only a moment later she sensed Deidara step over to her, and something fell on her hair. She snapped her head up, wondering just *what* he was doing now, but only got something in her eyes.

She rubbed her eyes frantically, hearing Deidara mutter something apologetic and dump something more on her head. "Wh-What are y-y-you doing...?" Hinata stuttered and coughed; whatever it was made her throat dry.

"Hold still, yeah." She obediently froze, but wondered what he was doing to her. A few minutes later (and after he ran his fingers through her hair a few times, much to her embarrassment), she heard him step back and say, "Yeah, it's done. Behold, the new Bya-chan!" The blonde appeared to look victorious, but Hinata really couldn't tell any difference, aside that her eyes were still adjusting to whatever she got in them. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something *weird*. Where there was normally dark hair, only hung a lock of dust-colored hair.

"Y-You p-pu-put dirt-t in my h-hair!" She exclaimed, hurriedly running her fingers through her previously dark locks.

"Hey! Don't get it all out, yeah! This'll work, Bya-chan, and it's just dirt. It'll wash out." He reached out to grab her wrist, halting her from cleaning her hair. "Since we can't change your pale eyes, we'll just change your hair! Get it, yeah?" Hinata was too busy trying not to notice that *technically* he was kissing her wrist because of that weird mouth on his hand. (*Oh my gosh, is this kissing? Doesn't he realize that? How could he not realize that? Oh my gosh, he's kissing me, isn't he?! No, he's not—but he is! Oh my... I-I shouldn't think of it. But... he's not moving his hand!* Her mind screamed hysterically.) But of course, by trying *not* to focus on it, she only did all the more, and ended up turning progressively redder until finally she just tilted back and fainted. "Bya-chan—!"

When she came to, the sun was at a sharper angle than before, and she had one large, blue eye staring into her own not three inches from her face. "Ah!" She jerked back, but only hit her head on the ground. So she was lying down. Hinata looked around, regulating her breathing once more, then finally sat back up.

"You're awake!" Deidara crowed, and his voice was girly again. The pink-kimono-clad shinobi grabbed her wrist again and yanked her to her feet. "Now we have to hurry, Bya-chan! I want to sleep in a *real bed*, yeah, and eat *real food* and I can't wait to get some more clay, yeah!" He danced around excitedly, oblivious to her blush. But that faded easily enough, and Hinata was forced to ask him a question. Or two.

"D-Deidara-kun... Y-You said w-w-we were getting s-supplies...?" She raised an eyebrow, and tried her best to look menacing. He just stopped his happy dance and looked sheepish. She didn't need any more of an answer than that, but she was also prompted to ask, "A-And... just *ho-how l-long* have you b-been in t-th-the wild-derness...?" (She also couldn't believe that she kept stuttering. But he was just *so* like Naruto, she supposed it was that.)

"Hmm... before or after I killed the Akatsuki guy, yeah? Afterward... about two months before I found you. Before that... Three or four years. I can't remember." He looked thoughtful, then cast her one more sheepish glance before resuming his happy dance. Hinata just watched him in mute shock.

Three or four years...? And he can't cook? For some reason, that was the first thought that popped into her head. Then he remembered his habit of surviving on soldier pills. Looking at him with a newly critical eye, she noted that he *was* incredibly skinny... the anorexic kind of skinny. (Soldier pills can only go so far.) "D-Deidara-kun...? How have y-you been eating...?" Her stammering was reduced by her sudden concern.

"Soldier pills, and whatever food I can steal, yeah. Can we *please* head into town now?" He asked in his unnervingly high voice. "Or are you going to pass out randomly again, Bya-chan?" Deidara stopped and looked at her, not unlike how she was currently eyeing him. "Why *did* you faint... yeah?"

Hinata frowned and blushed; she didn't want to go there. "L-L-Le-Let's-s j-ju-just g-go in-in-into t-town, o-ok-okay?" It went unspoken that neither of them would speak again of their questions.

Twenty minutes later, Deidara was smoothly lying to the hotel's clerk, while Hinata tried her hardest not to fret with her light hair. She had always been a clean person, and now she was forced to endure her head covered in dirt... "—And this is my sister-in-law, yeah." Deidara giggled girlishly, and put an affectionate arm around her shoulder, carefully hiding his palm from the woman's view. Hinata hated it, but she couldn't help but tense at the sudden contact. He must've noticed it as well, because he purposely let his arm fall back down afterward, coolly continuing, "We're waiting for her husband in this village, so we'll probably be here a few days, hee." Hinata forced herself to nod, though the blush that came with it was entirely involuntary. "Oh, and as you can see, my little Bya-chan here is a Konoha kunoichi, isn't that amazing? That means that we get a free room, too, doesn't it?"

The woman led them to their room, handing them the key without an extra glance. Hinata was partly relieved, partly disappointed that she was so easy to fool. She headed straight to the bathroom to rinse out her hair, but yet again, was stopped by a firm grip (*kiss!*) on her arm. "Wh-what?" She asked, not turning to face him.

"You can't wash your hair out yet, yeah. Don't you think it'll look suspicious if that woman sees you again with dark hair?" Deidara said seriously, though she could hear the smirk in his voice. "But..."

"B-But...?" She asked hopefully, and was trying not to concentrate on his hand.

"If you promise not to mess with my chakra any more, I'll see if I can find a hair color change jutsu. Back when I was a genin in Iwa, me and my team would come up with jutsu like that all the time to confuse the he—heck out of our sensei." The pale-haired, pale-eyed kunoichi turned to see him beaming at her. (But not use her *Juken* on him? She could surely keep in her nearly non-existent temper to stop it when he annoyed her, but what if she *really* needed to attack him? Or worse, what if something went wrong with some jutsu and *he* needed her to cut off his chakra?) Slowly, she nodded. "Alright! Go take a shower then, and I'll be making a list of supplies. Anything you'll need, Bya-chan?" He *finally* let go of her, and she finally relaxed. Deidara appeared to notice this as well, as he turned and walked over to casually inspect the window.

"U-um... no th-thank you..." Hinata replied haltingly, and scurried into the bathroom before she could embarrass herself further. *Stupid, now he's sad because he thinks you're... what am I? I just start to freak out because of those mouths...* She hung her head sullenly. But a small, truthful voice in her head asked her why she cared so much about what he thought.

And she found that she honestly couldn't answer it.

One thought-provoking, wonderfully hot and long shower later, the dark-haired girl cautiously

activated her Byakugan to check on Deidara. He was laying on the bed, and his chakra had seemed to recover almost completely. He really had amazing stamina and control to survive so many *Juken*. She smiled slightly to herself, and changed back into the stolen kimono. It was just so comfortable she couldn't help it, and it really *did* match her eyes...

When she softly stepped back into the darkened room, Hinata found Deidara back in his shinobi outfit and ponytail, snoring softly on the bed. A piece of paper lay on the pillow beside his cheek, and she carefully retrieved it, trying not to wake him. (But the blonde looked pretty out of it; she doubted that even one of Kiba and Akamaru's howling contests could wake him right now.) Scrawled in very messy, loopy handwriting was "*clay, soldier pills, kunai, clay, new shirt (black), new pants (black), hair ties, toothbrushes, & clay*". Hinata wondered if he meant to put clay on there three times, or if he just *really* needed some. Didn't he have any combat jutsu that didn't involve clay sculptures?

She silently took the list and departed the hotel through the window, like any skilled kunoichi should.

-.-.-

Deidara awoke to sun shining in his face. He rubbed his eye, and sat up. Why was the ground so squishy and soft? He looked down, and noticed that he was laying in a bed. "Yay." He just yawned, stifling it, and looked around. "Oh yeah... Hotel." He flopped back onto the softness, savoring it. He hadn't slept in a bed in a long time.

But then he bolted back up, doing an abrupt double take. The Hyuuga girl was curled up onto the tiniest possible corner of the bed, one arm and one leg actually hanging off the edge. He smacked himself in the head for his idiocy; he had ordered a hotel room with only *one* bed, and then fell asleep, sprawled out and taking all of the room like he usually did...

Deidara got off the bed, and, still feeling guilty, prodded her over until she was more fully on the bed, and placed a pillow under her head. Grinning at a job well done, he turned around and took a step forward—just to trip. But instead of hitting the floor, his head smacked into the door's handle, and *then* he hit the floor with a thump loud enough to wake the Hyuuga girl. Clutching his head and biting his tongue to stop the colorful words he'd like to shout, he glanced over to see her staring at him. "H-Hit my head, yeah. Sorry."

He looked over to see what he tripped on, while she only nodded, somewhat sleepily. The object turned out to be his backpack (that head was getting its revenge), but also another bag of unknown origin. Head wound forgotten, Deidara crawled over to inspect it. He actually squealed in joy when it turned out to be completely full of clay, kunai and a mini container of soldier pills. "U-Um, I-I'm sorry... I d-di-didn't kn-know what el-else to get o-on the list... Th-that's all I could g-get... sorry..." The Hyuuga was busy stammering.

"No, this is great, Bya-chan! How did you get this stuff, though, yeah?" He asked, still delighted over the unexpected gift. (He immediately took out a large blob of clay, and started working his chakra into it. He would feel much better after having some explosives ready with him.) "How'd you get this stuff?"

"They're considered shinobi weapons..." She said softly, and she smiled. Deidara blinked at her, then returned it with a grin of his own. "S-So I only had to sh-show my hitai-ate..." She added, as

if smug that she had been able to keep it away from him. But then again, he had never known her to be smug about anything... (What kind of kidnapper-hostage relationship did they have here?!)

"Well, that's great, yeah. I'm really glad you didn't have to spend any money..." Deidara thoughtfully glanced at his own scratched headband, tied loosely around his backpack's strap. (He *did* have money, but surely with a hitai-ate he could manage to get a few more freebies... but did that apply to missing-nin? Strange thing to find out *now* of all times...) "Well, hmm." He scratched his head, and ran his fingers over his ponytail; he'd have to take that out again for his disguise... "Hey, I know, Bya-chan! Wanna go shopping? You'll need a new outfit too, right? And you'll need to pick out the color of hair ties you want, and it'll look totally natural for two chicks to go out on a shopping spree, yeah." (*Now I won't have to pretend to be a kunoichi to get my stuff, I can keep an eye on her, and it totally works*, he stated mentally.) The Hyuuga looked taken aback at the invitation, but at the same time, tempted by his offer.

"W-Wait... hair ties...?" She mumbled, pressing her fingers together nervously. Deidara looked at her hands for a moment, then smiled.

"Yeah! Every ninja with long hair should have their hair tied back, right? I just have mine in my face 'cause I like to be different, and it hides my scope. Yeah." He pointed out, and with one hand brushed back his bangs to reveal his scope. "But let's go, Bya-chan!"

They were halfway down the stairs before she managed to stammer out that he forgot his voice-changing jutsu. He panicked momentarily, but hurriedly formed the seals, then adjusted his kimono (though he cheated today; he wore his pants underneath) and hair. He could've sworn she rolled her eyes at him, but it was hard to tell. She had pale hair now as well, and they could've passed for sisters-in-law. (Which was pretty creepy if one thought about it.) Deidara told her to wait outside for him, while he asked the receptionist to have a room switch to a room with two beds ("Yeah, poor little Bya-chan is a bit *modest* about sharing a bed, especially after the wedding, yeah."). As he was chatting with the woman, he sensed two people come up behind him.

Deidara tried not to flinch, but he had that same awkward feeling he always had when the Hyuuga activated her Byakugan and looked at him... He mumbled some petty goodbye to the receptionist, and only after he had carefully passed the two men, he looked back. *Shit!* He screeched silently. It was the Hyuuga (Neji?) and the Uchiha. He quickly and stiffly stomped right past them, while the shinobi obviously talked to the woman about getting a room. The kimono-clad blonde had no choice but to go back up to his room after talking about *getting* a room, in case they were listening. He just hoped his 'hostage' wouldn't have seen them, or decide to make a break for it.

Now what? No, wait, it's fine, yeah... we'll be switching rooms, and even with that Byakugan, there's no way he could spot us; we both look too differently. But what if chakra systems are unique?! Deidara glanced down at his body, wondering about the unseen energy inside. *Shit, I'm just going to have to pretend I haven't seen them for Bya-chan...*

He departed via window, after moving their things to their new room. Approaching the Hyuuga girl was easy, after he pasted a fake, cheerful smile on his face. "S-So, Bya-chan—"

"Th-That was Neji-niisan and S-Sasuke, wasn't it?" She asked quietly, her light bangs hiding her face from view. Deidara flinched, cursing the Byakugan and her sensitive nature. He slowly nodded instead, getting ready for a race, if he had to chase after her.

But then the two Konoha-nin departed from the hotel, and before they could pass not three feet in front of them, Deidara grabbed her and hid in the nearest store. He put his hand over her mouth, just in case she decided to start screaming or something (*But why would she? She doesn't miss them that badly, does she...?*). She stiffened, but Deidara was too busy watching the two (*Neji and*

Sasuke, eh?) walk by, muttering darkly about lack of money.

The pale-eyed girl was very red in the face when he let her go, and carefully led her back out of the store. It looked like only sheer determination had kept her from passing out again, for whatever reason. Deidara raised an eyebrow, as she hurriedly gasped out, "Th-They don't h-have any money! We-We need to-to help them...!"

"And do what, yeah? Buy them a hotel room?" Her pleading eyes gave her reply.

-.-.-

The hair ties were bought easily, as were the toothbrushes (he told her that with three mouths to brush, especially digging clay bits out of two of them, he wore toothbrushes out fast). The outfits, on the other hand, took several hours, several arguments, a *Juken* (she stopped it from actually touching him, remembering her promise, but the chakra in her palm accidentally disrupted his "voice change no jutsu"), and several stores for them to finally decide on something. And ironically, Deidara spent more time picking out *her* outfit (and vice versa, she noted shamefully) than his own.

"You can't go wrong with fishnet, yeah." He muttered in his now-male-again voice. Hinata just smiled slightly. Sure, net material was worn on pretty much every shinobi she knew, but usually *under* their clothes; Deidara was wearing his on the outside of his shirt. (At least he was wearing his pants overtop the other bit.) She herself had bought some, but only for her calves and forearms. Otherwise, it was another baggy, heavy, cream-colored jacket for her.

"I-I'm sorry..." She sighed, for at least the tenth time in the last hour, and apologized for stopping his jutsu. She could *see* how it was bugging him not to talk. But once again, the blonde just shrugged it off.

"Hey, Bya-chan, yeah..." He ignored the weird looks several passerby gave him, "Could you carry this stuff back to the room? It's number 418. I need to go check something out..." He gave her a kicked-puppy look, and she finally agreed, though Deidara on his own wasn't ever a good thing.

-.-.-

Deidara smirked once his back was turned and the Hyuuga was on her way back to the hotel. He needed a drink, but more importantly, he's *love* a reason to get into a fight. And what quicker way to get into a fight was to dress like a girl in a bar full of drunken men? (He *needed* to burn off some excess energy. Actually eating a meal for the first time in forever gave him too much for his normally hyper body to handle.)

But before he even made it to the bar, he heard someone call out, "Hey, uh, pink lady!"

Feigning outrage and trying to force his chakra to work again, Deidara whirled around—only to spot the two people he least wanted to see (especially without chakra or jutsu). His eye widened, as did the Hyuuga's white ones. *H-How could they get have spotted me?!* He thought nervously, taking a taijutsu stance. Without his bombs or any other jutsu, this was going to be tough.

But then the Hyuuga (*It was Neji, wasn't it...?*) stood up, and Deidara noticed that they were both drunk. He relaxed, and grinned. The Uchiha couldn't even stand. "Y-You...!" Neji shouted in a slightly slurred voice. Deidara just smirked innocently at him.

"Me? Yeah?" His male voice threw off several passerby again, but neither Konoha-nin seemed fazed. (By the voice or the kimono, apparently.) "Don't bother, you two. You can't even stand, yeah." Deidara stuck out his tongue at them, and turned to leave. They really weren't worth his time in this state.

"Hee-hee, *Gokakyuu no jutsu!*" The blonde leapt aside as two buildings and a tree to his immediate right burst into flames. He whirled around to see both of them standing now, the Uchiha looking sadistically cheerful. Deidara glanced at the roaring fire beside him, and just now realized that alcohol plus fire jutsu equaled super strength fire.

So it would be one chakra depleted Iwa-nin versus two completely smashed Konoha-nin. He rolled his eyes, thinking, *Well this will be the battle of the century, eh?*

Neji swayed on his feet for a moment, then charged, regardless of his inebriated state. Deidara ducked his kick, but his fist caught him in the stomach, and that wasn't any gentle punches like the Hyuuga kunoichi gave him—that was raw taijutsu. The blonde doubled over, but turned that into a handstand and brought his foot down on his enemy's head. Successfully flipping, Deidara straightened to look for the Uchiha before the Hyuuga got back up. But he felt a hand grab his ankle, and the next thing he knew, Neji swung him around, finally letting go to let him slam into one of the nearby, non-burning buildings.

Deidara got back up immediately, still trying to access his chakra. (But at least that would make any chakra-filled strikes by Neji completely useless.) Something crashed into his head, but he only jerked over, grabbed his assailant's hand, and swung him gracefully over his head. Deidara jumped into the air to land a kick, but the Sharingan user rolled out of the way. He growled to himself, and swore that he needed to learn more taijutsu—his attack range right now was little more than kicking and punching.

The Uchiha, even lying on his stomach and glaring back up at Deidara, was trying to form some hand seals. The Iwa-nin just jumped over, grabbed the back of his shirt's collar, and using his forward momentum, swung him over his shoulder and into the Hyuuga. He then decided that he could *not* fight like this, and high-tailed it out of there.

Or, at least *tried* to; he felt a strangely strong grip on the back of his kimono. Without a second thought, Deidara just freed himself from the pink clothes, racing back to his hotel while thanking his paranoia for making him wear pants underneath. He made it to the hotel in record time (being spurred on by adrenaline, panic and some sort of fear can do that), and didn't care about the weird look the woman at the front desk gave him.

Bursting into their hotel room, Deidara just shouted, "Bya-chan! We're going, yeah!" She had been laying on the bed, reading some sort of book or something, and bolted upright when he ran in. He just ignored her and hurriedly grabbed his new shirt (and fishnet, gods he loved that stuff) and slipped that on. He tied his slashed hitai-ate onto his head, and hurriedly tied back his hair as well. "Do you know *Shunshin*?"

She just shook her head, still too shocked to do anything. Deidara sighed, but noticed that her things were already in her backpack (also bought that afternoon), and were laying by the door. He raised an eyebrow at that, but instead, hurriedly taught her the signs of the body flicker technique. "You're going to have to hold onto me, yeah, 'cause I *still* can't control my chakra. I can't perform a *Shunshin* right now."

"Wh-What's g-going on?"

"Well... three houses are on fire, one is missing a wall, and several people saw a shinobi fight out of three supposed non-shinobi people. This town isn't going to be happy, yeah." He was interrupted by a loud, demanding knock on the door and bit back a curse. "Time to go!"

Unfortunate Incidents

Neji staggered back to his feet, arms feeling like lead. His head was fuzzy, though his vision was unusually clear. Then he realized that his Byakugan was activated. Sasuke was likewise trying to get to his feet behind him, Sharingan on and spinning. "Sh-Shit..." The Caged Bird slurred his snarl, and blinked in the harsh firelight. Sasuke just giggled. People were already gathering, watching them both with shocked, interested expressions.

"They're shinobi!" One member of the growing crowd shouted, and the suddenness of it made Neji wince.

His head hurt, his eyes took everything in too brightly, his arms and legs were heavy, he felt soreness setting in from the (strangely) completely taijutsu fight... and now he had to deal with this. "Sasuke... I-I think we need to retreat..." He muttered, feeling drained. Though he had barely done anything... (He hated getting drunk.) The crowd was getting louder now, and only increased the pounding in his head. He needed to get out of here.

--.-

Sasuke awoke to a cheerfully bright sun and a mild hangover, without ever remembering having been asleep. Or did he even fall asleep? Was he knocked out? (Shinobi instincts kicking in.) But that blonde freak—"Damn!" The Uchiha shot up, looking around for the Iwa-nin. Or the village, for that matter. Neither were in the vicinity. Just Neji, dozing in a position that looked like he had fallen asleep where he threw himself to the ground.

He surmised that Neji must have gotten them away from the village. But why get out of town so quickly? (*It may have something to do with incinerating three or four buildings*, his conscience informed him matter-of-factly.) "OH SHIT—MY KATANA." Sasuke howled, and this time his mission partner awoke. Neji regarded him for a calm moment, then pointed over to where both packs lay, the blade (in its old leather sheath, but Sasuke never minded small miracles) poking conspicuously out of one. "...Oh."

"You owe me, Uchiha." The dark-haired shinobi stood up, and stretched, joints cracking audibly. He reached back to tie his hair in its usual low ponytail.

"Consider that paying you back for the Itachi alias." Sasuke responded dryly, picking up his backpack and digging out an extra cloth for a new strap. While he was busy performing surgery on his weapon's cover, Neji grabbed his own bag, and got his hitai-ate out. The Hyuuga obviously didn't feel very comfortable without it, but Sasuke couldn't care less about his. (Not like he cared much about Konoha any more. He was just forcibly restrained from leaving. Plus, he didn't even fancy going after Orochimaru anymore, now that he was dead.)

"We are roughly four hours away from the village." Neji told him, "And Hinata-sama and the Iwa shinobi couldn't have gotten more than an hour's head start. Though if they slept through the night or continued fleeing, I have no idea. ...We should continue on, now."

"Hn." Sasuke grunted in reply, testing the fabric's strength with a yank. It held, so he slipped it on over his shoulder, adjusting his shirt's high collar before standing up. The Uchiha was ready; he

was always ready to travel. Neji looked similarly ready, and activated his Byakugan. He glanced around before nodding and the two jumped into the trees. Branches were usually the preferred method of Konoha-nin travel, and it was much harder to track them that way. (In case those villagers weren't happy with their visit.)

He let his eyes shift into their Sharingan state as well, watching Neji from his position about a half-step behind him. The forest blurred past them, and Sasuke knew that the Hyuuga was watching him back. They may be comrades, but both of them knew the others' motives, and just how radically different those reasons were. Sasuke was hunting his brother, Neji was tracking his cousin. Sasuke didn't want to catch up until the Iwa-nin and Hinata were with the Akatsuki. Neji wanted to catch them as soon as possible. The crimson-eyed shinobi narrowed his eyes at his partner's back, and finally turned to look in front of him.

But then Neji whirled around, in mid-jump, his white eyes wide and an expression of shock on his face. "Sasuke—" Sasuke didn't hear any more, on account of the fact that just as suddenly, Orochimaru's seal on the back of his neck felt like it exploded. With a strangled yelp, the Uchiha clutched his shoulder, missing the next branch. He flung out his other hand, barely catching himself, but swinging down under the tree to come face-to-face with a pair of hollow eyes.

Just great, Sasuke snarled mentally as the clay exploded. He had had barely enough time to drop his arm from the branch to guard his face, let alone getting away from it. Ears ringing and a rather painful burning on his arms, the Uchiha dropped to the ground, immediately kneeling and seizing the cursed seal again. He was forced to shut off the Sharingan, lest the evil chakra escape and take over again. He felt more than heard Neji land beside him, though if he said something, he had no way of hearing it.

Deaf, burnt and wondering what the hell set the seal off now, Sasuke clamped his teeth down and struggled not to shout. He sensed that Neji was telling him something, but for the life of him couldn't figure out what. *The snake is dead, why is it still working?!* His mind demanded, but his body gave no answer. Cracking open an eye, he noticed that the explosion had burnt away much of the fabric of his shirt's sleeves—but more importantly, the black figures of the seal were slowly working their way down his wrist. "Sh-shit..." Sasuke hissed, trying to repress all of his chakra. As far as he knew, he was, but the seal just kept coming. He was ready to take out his katana and merely try to carve the seal out of his neck (stupid but it hurt that much), but then he felt a hand on his back. The Sharingan were activating on their own—an unfortunate side effect of the seal, forcing him to use more chakra and draw it out further.

But then, the next thing he knew, he felt Neji withdraw his other hand and hit him—palm-side up, nothing painful. The world faded black nonetheless, and Sasuke welcomed it.

-.-.-

Neji stood over the unconscious body of his partner, panting slightly. His Byakugan saw the problem, but Sasuke had apparently been unable to hear him, most likely the result of that unfortunately-timed explosion. A strange, foreign-looking seal near the back of his neck (always had been a curiosity for the Hyuuga) was deteriorating, but that only seemed to trigger it. Some sort of kamikaze aspect programmed into it was the probable answer. He'd had no choice but to shut down the Uchiha's chakra to stop it from spreading—it already covered one arm and about half of his face with strange swirls.

But the marks didn't recede.

Neji's heart stopped (at least it felt like it), but then, *finally*, they started to retreat back toward the source of the problem. The Hyuuga, taking a breath, was about to yank Sasuke's shirt collar down to see what kind of cursed seal it was when something entered his Byakugan's vision. Letting loose a long, colorful string of swearing, he barely had time to look up before he spotted a large, off-white-colored bird soar overhead, a blonde head grinning down at him.

They were *behind* them the whole time?! Neji cursed again and was about to follow them, but looked down at Sasuke's body instead. *Damn it, what am I supposed to do now?* He only had a split second's time of thought before the missing nin and his cousin would be too far away to try to attack. He leapt into a tree, and pumped his legs full of chakra before jumping up to try to catch the clay bird.

"Hey, Neji can jump, yeah!" His opponent called, leaning over the bird's shoulder to watch. He only looked mildly amused as Neji caught the wing and swung himself over to stand on the creature's head. "If you're looking for Bya-chan, you won't find her." Neji frowned; he had thought Hinata was on the bird. It was just the Iwa-nin, taking out a handful of shuriken, and himself. So where was she?

"Where is Hinata-sama?" The dark-haired Hyuuga easily dodged the shuriken thrown at him, and was in front of the blonde with a kunai pressed to his neck in a second. But then the bird dived suddenly, and Neji was thrown off balance—over his shoulder and behind the blonde. Once again, the kunai went to his opponent's neck. "Where is Hinata—What are you doing?!" He shouted over the roar of the wind. He felt the man in his grasp tense slightly, then laugh as his bird alighted beside Sasuke's body, uprooting a tree in the process.

"Haha, watch and find out, yeah!" He cackled, and the clay bird's head dropped down, and swallowed Sasuke. Neji paled slightly, but he knew that the Uchiha wasn't in any immediate danger. Instead he pressed the blade harder against his neck.

"Where. Is. Hinata-sama." He snarled, and the Iwa-nin shrugged. He was rapidly losing patience with this insane shinobi.

"I don't know, yeah, and I'm not telling. See, I was just the alarm system. Bye-bye, yeah!" Neji swore as the shadow clone disappeared in a little puff of smoke. That was rather clever of him to pull this off, and it only proved that he was more adept at reading his opponent's moves than the Hyuuga originally thought. He reached over with his kunai and stabbed the bird's head, dragging it down to open it right between its eyes. Its flight path began to falter, and Neji felt it swell beneath his feet as he tried to get Sasuke out.

Instead, he switched plans and grabbed the Uchiha's katana, slicing off the bird's head from the rest of its body. That would minimize the blast if he couldn't get them away in time. The still-flapping wings propelled the body past them as the head and the two shinobi fell out of the sky. Neji was now approaching an almost panicked state, slashing away as best as he could with his partner's blade at the stubborn clay. Above them, the bird detonated, and Neji had just gotten hold of Sasuke's arm and hauled him out of the cavernous beak when the head exploded.

The Hyuuga never again wanted to attempt a *Kaiten* while trying to hold onto a comrade. Neji was dizzy and unbalanced when he stopped, though his chakra appeared to have stopped the explosion from touching either of them. He staggered over to lean against a tree for balance, and after a moment, punched the bark. "Damn..." He breathed, and tossed Sasuke's katana over by his body. (He'd always hated those things, having no real talent for them.)

This had come to a battle of wits, not jutsu. The miniature clay whatever-it-was was more of a perimeter alert, and it was the second one they had tripped. The large bird guaranteed it that the shadow clone looked more realistic—why would the real thing be walking around when he could fly? And Neji had been too worried about Sasuke and his bizarre, defective seal to pay attention to the Iwa-nin's depleted chakra. He'd thought that it was just leftover from the fight last night, if anything. And now the bastard knew that Sasuke was out, their location, and everything he needed to know to either slip past them or ambush them.

It was about time Neji practiced some of his other jutsu.

Fake It All

Deidara smiled slightly. He leaned back lazily, though it definitely wasn't the smartest thing to do at the moment. The Hyuuga girl squeaked and turned around, evidently afraid he'd fallen off. And falling off of a large, clay bird traveling at high speeds several hundred yards off the ground is a very bad thing to do. "Don't worry, yeah! I'm still here!" He had finally given into temptation and made a bird large enough to carry them both the rest of the way. But only after making sure he knew exactly where their pursuers were and that they had their hands full.

"O-okay..." She stammered back, and Deidara sat back up. The dark-haired girl was sitting in front of him, straddling the bird's neck. He was in a more awkward position, having to put his feet behind the wings. Deidara constantly felt like he was about to fall off. So instead he just used that as an excuse to himself as he tightened his arms around her waist.

"We should be there in about two hours, yeah." He set his chin on her shoulder, talking into her ear over the wind. She shuddered slightly, then slowly nodded. The blonde frowned slightly; did he still creep her out? He sighed, inaudible over the air rushing past them, and shifted so he was resting his forehead against her shoulder instead.

Why was he always so horrible at making friends?

I should look on the bright side more often, he scolded himself. Konoha hasn't sent ANBU after us yet, and I've lost my pursuers for now. The anti-rot jutsu is holding up. I should be talking to Akatsuki in two hours. Iwa isn't chasing after me, either...

The two were silent, though Deidara's ears were starting to sting because of the wind, and his legs were seriously sore. In fact, his back was getting sore as well from leaning forward like that. He frowned slightly, and shifted to tuck his knees under him. He felt the joints pop, but it was much more comfortable.

Until he started sliding backwards. The Hyuuga must've felt the tug, because she turned around, same concerned expression on her face as before. He scrabbled forward, and ended up scooting her forward and pressing awkwardly to her back in order to get his legs in front of the bird's wings. She was tensed up and undeniably blushing heavily, but Deidara couldn't care less at the moment. He was finally comfortable, and her heavy jacket was soft, from what he could feel through his shirt.

More silent travel, but this time it was more uncomfortable from last time. He felt almost guilty after the first few minutes, but really couldn't see how he could sit anymore comfortably in any other position. The explosives expert sighed again, marveling at how even with someone he should hate he still felt awkward around.

He had the bird swoop down to skim just above the treetops, scanning the area with his scope for landmarks. He wanted to know what country he was in, especially as they neared their goal. Nothing but trees, and a large, far-off mountain range to his left. Nothing he could use to mark his location. If he hadn't been so pressed for space, he could've used a positioning jutsu, but as it was, he couldn't.

Deidara was just beginning to relax from his accidental almost-slip-off-the-bird-and-die episode when he felt the killing intent. He sensed the attack before he saw it, but even so, he barely had enough time to dodge. A large column of black, cord-like *things* burst out of the trees below them, nearly decapitating his bird and missing his and the Hyuuga's left feet by mere inches. She gave a little scream as the bird swerved, but Deidara was yanking her to her feet on the back of the clay

before she could react further. "Damn, we've been spotted." He swore, reaching both hands into his clay pouch. He still needed some time to make new clay creatures, so he couldn't afford to lose this bird yet.

"*Byakugan!*" She said softly, but his ears picked it up over the wind. She pointed hurriedly to her left, shouting, "L-Left!" Deidara didn't question her, but forced his bird to turn sharply left, and narrowly avoided a *huge* stream of fire. He stared in shock at the flames, even as he felt his skin prickle from the heat.

"Bya-chan, jump, yeah!" He shouted, and tossed about five miniaturized clay birds into the air. None of them were large enough to hold both of them, for maneuverability purposes, but that was no problem. The problem was that she hesitated. "For god's sake, *trust me!*" Deidara grabbed her wrist and yanked her off of the jutsu, just as a pillar of water shot up and hit it. The bird lost its head and half of one wing, flipping over from the force of the attack. He and the girl fell, but one of his speedy, double-winged birds caught her. He chose a larger one for himself, and sent the remains of his first bird down to detonate in the forest.

"Where are they, yeah?!" He shouted, scanning the forest desperately. His scope didn't pick up a thing. "Bya-chan, how many are there? Where are they?"

"Th-There are... two! Down there!" She wobbled unsteadily on the smaller bird, finally opting to sit on it as she pointed.

"TWO?!" He bellowed, and instantly focused on the spot that she pointed out. As if seeing they were spotted, Deidara noticed that two figures stood in a clearing, staring up at them. He sent two of his birds down to greet them.

And, as expected of the black cloaks with red clouds, the explosions seemed to have little to no effect. But Deidara was too busy wondering how just two shinobi, even if they were Akatsuki, could manage to use two or three different elements, especially of that power. "Bya-chan, stay up here, yeah." He told her, as if she had any real choice. This moment had come much sooner than expected.

-.-.-

Hinata worriedly bit her lip, watching as Deidara descended to meet the two. She was already shaken at the sudden attacks, and especially from having been pulled mid-flight to land on another, much smaller bird. Now he was going down to talk to them *alone*? "B-Be careful..." She whispered, but of course he didn't hear her. The blonde was already halfway down to them.

She could see them with her special white eyes, but she couldn't hear them. And one of them was wearing some sort of mask, and Deidara's back was to her. Which meant she could only read the lips and expression of one of them, and the dark-haired kunoichi could only focus on him if she really concentrated.

The ninja whose lips she was reading was shorter than the other one, with slicked-back light hair and light eyes. He and his partner were wearing the same outfits, though he wore his open, with no shirt underneath. The pale-haired shinobi blatantly held out his weapon for Deidara (and her) to see; a large, three-pronged scythe.

And his choice of vocabulary made her redden slightly. It was quite colorful and creative.

Hinata began to worry. She hated staying on the sidelines. It took her back to her genin days, back when she was even more useless. Determination seeping into her pale eyes, the Hyuuga noticed with her Byakugan that Deidara was calling in his other bird, probably for backup. Not hesitating this time, she carefully timed her jump so that she landed deftly on the back of it, and was thus heading to his side along with it.

Deidara turned around when she flew down, his visible eye wide with disbelief—with an underlying anger. She almost frowned, but just gave him a resolute look, and he turned slowly back to the other two.

The other black-cloaked shinobi was much, much taller than the other. His hair was covered with a white cloth, and his face from the nose down was covered with a black one. But what was visible was his dark skin and strange, white eyes. Hinata blinked; she was used to seeing ashen eyes, every day, but not on a non-Hyuuga. He didn't appear to have any visible weapons, but his cloak was buttoned up to the high collar, so no telling what he was hiding.

"And who the fuck is this supposed to be?" The pale-haired shinobi demanded. Hinata forced herself not to wince; she wasn't used to such language, even with Inuzuka Kiba as a teammate. "Your pet?"

"No." Deidara replied coldly in a short voice. "She's my partner, yeah." This surprised her, but she kept her face an emotionless mask like a good kunoichi should. Since when had she been upgraded to a partner? Or was he just saying that, to avoid questions or further confrontation?

"That little bitch is your *partner*? Haha, that's a good one. She's a pipsqueak!" The man laughed cruelly, and she couldn't resist a small frown this time.

The other, taller man must have noticed that, because miraculously, he stated, "Hidan, shut the hell up. Before I *make you*. We still need to—"

"You, make me? Hah, that's a riot!" The pale-haired (Hinata noticed his hair matched her eyes, an off-white sort of color) shinobi, now Hidan, burst out laughing again. Only this time, he actually doubled over, the scythe strapped to his back sliding up. "You bastard, you couldn't make me even if I *was* mortal. Hahaha, you pansy..." Deidara tensed up slightly, and Hinata felt herself do the same. Even laughing, that mortality comment was purposely let out, to let them know.

So you couldn't kill this foul-mouthed Hidan...?

"Hidan, *shut up*." The taller shinobi snarled, but narrowed his eyes and turned back to the two hovering on the clay birds. "So, you said you wanted to join Akatsuki. What makes you think you just join like that?"

Deidara rummaged around in his backpack, and finally withdrew a kunai. She watched him, worried that he was going to attack them (with only a kunai!), but then he formed a seal and the blade disappeared in a puff of smoke. The blonde stood up on the back of the bird, and held out what appeared to be a severed head by its long, black hair. Hinata couldn't see its face (not that she wanted to), but the look on the other two's faces told her enough.

"So you managed to kill the snake bastard, eh?" Hidan's voice had lost much of its laughter and had become cold. (He still retained the vocabulary, though.) "...You think just because you killed him you two are instantly in?"

"..." Deidara was silent, but he tensed up again. The other, double-winged bird glided silently over, hovering not a foot behind him.

"Still... you've earned our interest..." The other cloaked ninja said haltingly, and moved his hands slightly. "...Hidan... I think a test is in order."

The ashen-haired man looked startled, but quickly regained his composure and grinned roguishly. "Hey, whatever you say, you old bastard. I guess I'm the newbie here, so if you say it's test time, let's give him a fucking test. The bitch, too, right?" Hidan looking positively gleeful. "When does the test start, then?"

"You." His partner ignored him, and instead stared dispassionately at Deidara. "You have one month to reach the Akatsuki headquarters. If you get there alive in less than thirty days, then you may join."

Deidara visibly perked up, all tension gone. "That's it? But the Akatsuki headquarters is just an hour away—"

"Like hell!" Hidan interrupted, smirking. "We just moved it. It's in the Country of Rain, now, pretty boy."

"Hidan, *shut the fuck up*. Or I'll rip out your heart." The other one appeared to be losing his patience very rapidly with his partner. Hinata mentally stored that tidbit away, in case it came in handy later on, should they have to face these two. (*What am I talking about? I'm acting like I'm going to fight as Deidara-kun's partner*, she scolded herself.)

"As if you haven't tried a dozen times before, Kakuzu." Hidan waved his hand dismissively in the air, then turned back to Deidara and Hinata, a rather predatory gleam in his lavender eyes. "One month to get to the Rain. And don't let any *obstacles* stop you now."

Hinata knew there was more to this test than these two let on.

...-

Deidara's mind was racing. What the hell had they planned? What sort of obstacles? It was a stretch to make it to the land of the rain in that time frame anyway, and he even had to pass by Konoha again unless take a wide detour he had no time for.

But still... this was his dream. The realization of his dream was in his grasp, and only a month and a few obstacles stood in his path. He had taken down one of the legendary Sannin, evaded Konoha jounin time and time again, evaded Iwa ANBU repeatedly, and now faced down two Akatsuki members without confrontation.

He could do this.

Feeling a boost of confidence, the blonde nodded. Kakuzu nodded back, and squinted at him. (If he didn't know any better, he would've said that the tall shinobi was smiling.) Hidan, on the other hand, outright grinned and crossed his arms over his bare chest. "Well then! See you in a month, I guess! If you make it, haha, pretty boy."

The two disappeared with a *Shunshin*, and Deidara finally relaxed. He glanced over at the Hyuuga

kunoichi, wondering why she had switched birds to join him. "Were you that curious, yeah?" He asked without prelude.

She instantly reddened at the sudden question, and stuttered, "N-no... I-I-I w-was wo-worried..." Her voice was softer than usual. Deidara raised an eyebrow, and wondered what she was so worried about.

"So then... ready to race to the Rain?" He asked instead in a pleasant, falsely cheerful voice. The Iwa missing nin knew that whatever these 'obstacles' would be, they'd try to be deadly.

She smiled, just as falsely as he. "O-of course..."

He didn't have to wonder about her ulterior motives, or her change of heart. Deidara just reached into his clay pouch to get them a new traveling bird. "Let's go then, Bya-chan. Yeah."

Farewell to Arms

"We need to head back to Konoha." Sasuke seemed surprised when Neji announced that, but instantly scowled. It had been too long; the Hokage would be furious with them. And neither could afford to become missing-nin... yet.

"...Fine." Sasuke just muttered. Neji had already filled him in on the details of what happened during his rather embarrassing 'fainting spell', as the Hyuuga put it, and that only worked to further his dark mood. But it had been proven that they couldn't really put up much of a fight against this Iwa-nin with just the two of them, and there was a chance, that if they played by the Hokage's rules, that they could join another team to track the blonde freak down.

Because the blonde freak would lead to Itachi.

-.-.-

It only took them three days to reach Konoha again, but this time they were heading in a straight line, unlike the winding route they had taken while hunting Hinata and the Iwa-nin. And within an hour, Neji and Sasuke were both in front of the Hokage, being chewed out for not coming back with Sakura and Naruto, going over their time limit, and most importantly (but not outwardly stated), not catching them.

"—And Naruto comes back half *dead* and there's no sign of either of *you*, and what the hell did you two think I had to tell the council?! Your *father*?! This is a paperwork nightmare..." The busty woman sat down heavily at her desk, and laid her forehead on its surface. Very unprofessional, but neither shinobi were in a position to question her, even if she wasn't the Hokage.

"...Hokage-sama." Neji said after it was clear that she wasn't going to talk again. "Uchiha-san and I are both curious as to when the next mission to rescue Hinata-sama would be. Both of us would like to be on that squad."

"No." Tsunade said shortly, her voice only slightly muffled by the wood. Both dark-haired geniuses looked mildly surprised.

"...What?" Sasuke asked, much less formally than Neji had spoken.

"No. After it seemed like you two weren't coming back, you two were pronounced dead. That was *weeks* ago. This is already going to be a pain in the ass to sort out... Hiashi called off the hunt for Hinata, and with it the Iwa-nin. And frankly, I can't afford to lose any more shinobi to that man. Kurenai was a good woman, and an even better ninja. Akamaru is still recovering, and Naruto is, too. There's already too many missions from other villages, and a shortage of Leaf ninja. It doesn't look good when I have to turn down missions..." The blonde woman set her chin on the desk, staring evenly at them both. She suddenly looked much more tired, much older. (The Hokage position had to be stressful.)

But Neji had no sympathy for anyone who would give up a hunt for another Konoha-nin. Especially Hinata. He was about to point out that the same thing happened with Sasuke, but the Uchiha beat him to it. "What about me? You didn't give up on me."

"You were brought back on the first try, Sasuke. And none of your rescue team were 'dead', not even Chouji or Neji." Tsunade replied easily. But Sasuke's glare didn't soften.

"But I tried to leave of my own free will. Hinata was kidnapped. Doesn't that have to do with anything?" He snarled, and his eyes shifted into their Sharingan state. The Hokage sat bolt upright in her chair, her glare more frightening than the Uchiha's.

"Sasuke! Neji! That is enough! The hunt to retrieve her has been called off! Konoha just simply *cannot* spare any shinobi at this time, even for a Hyuuga!" She barked, and both geniuses had the grace to look cowed. "You two are dismissed. ...Sasuke, you may want to check in with Sakura. She's been worried sick over you. And Neji, I'm sure that your team will be just as happy to see you."

But what about Hinata-sama's team? Neji thought as he marched stiffly out of the office with Sasuke. They shared one mere glance, but that single glance told them both everything they needed to know. The Hyuuga turned to his right, and exited the building, while Sasuke evidently went off to find his teammates.

Hinata-sama... I won't give up on you like Konoha has, he vowed as his feet automatically took him to his own team's favorite training ground. And, as usual, he heard Lee and Gai-sensei sparring before he saw them. The pair were effortlessly pulling off taijutsu moves that would probably make even him break his back, and Tenten was watching on the sidelines, sharpening a kunai. The second she saw him, though, she jumped down from the wooden post, kunai forgotten. "Oh my god, Neji!" She raced toward him and embraced him, but they both knew it was merely a hug of worry. (They'd talked it out long ago, as genin. Comrades before love.) Lee and Gai both stopped as well, but as Neji was disentangling himself from the weapons mistress, he got attacked in a fierce group hug by the other two. The Hyuuga groaned audibly, but neither Lee nor his sensei let go of him.

"Neji! My prodigy, I knew you couldn't be killed that easily! For the power of youth is still coursing through your veins—"

"Neji, you have come back! My rival has returned to fight with me once more, and now we shall never be parted—"

"Hey, you two, I think the prodigal rival is suffocating." Tenten said loudly, and pulled them off. Neji gasped for air, nodding his thanks toward her. "So, Neji, is Sasuke back, too...?" She asked shyly, glancing away and pretending to be looking at Lee.

"Yes, he is back as well." The dark-haired shinobi said carefully, also looking at Lee. The bushy-browed ninja just gave him a good guy pose. "Lee... I have a favor to ask."

"YOSH! Anything, Neji! For you have returned from the land of the dead—"

"No, Lee. I just want to practice on my taijutsu again." Neji cut him off firmly. He hadn't been 'back' ten minutes and he'd already had enough of his comrade's crazy chatter. Before the taijutsu master could say anything more, he continued, "And Tenten, I would like to perform a little experiment with my *Kaiten*, so would you be kind enough to help me with that?"

"Yes! Finally, teammates and comrades once more! THE POWER OF YOUTH SHALL COMPEL YOU TO STAY TOGETHER FOREVER." Gai crowed, fisting one hand as triumphant tears coursed down his cheeks.

"Oh, Gai-sensei! You are so wise!" Lee wailed, and started crying as well. The Hyuuga and

kunoichi looked on with a faintly impatient air.

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

As they continued their chorus, the genius decided that he and Tenten should practice first. He led her away, toward the other end of the training ground. She looked at him quizzically, but he didn't say anything until she finally sighed in exasperation and asked, "Alright, Neji, now what did you want to *experiment* with?"

"My *Kaiten*. I'd like to see if I can vary the amount of chakra I use to a greater extent, and if so, how much force it would have against oncoming projectiles." He replied crisply. The brunette girl only shrugged, and unstrapped the large scroll tied to her back. Neji took a few paces backward as she bit her thumb and unrolled the paper. "First I will try it with less chakra."

Tenten looked a bit put-out, but smiled as she moved her hand to another part of the scroll. "Typical Neji. Training the day you get back..." She shook her head, but she got a gleam in her eye. Without further warning, suddenly a pair of huge shuriken, followed by a rain of kunai raced toward him. But Neji started his heavenly spin, forcing himself to use less chakra.

Unfortunately, it went as predicted. Less chakra meant less protection, and it showed. The *Kaiten* only deflected about half of the kunai and did nothing to stop the shuriken. It was only luck that they didn't behead him, as he stared in shock as they tore through the forest behind him. Tenten grinned sheepishly as he turned his disbelieving stare back toward her. "At least they didn't get you." She said in an apologetic voice.

"At least..." He replied dryly.

--.-

Sasuke found his teammates in the hospital, of course. Naruto was shouting at Sakura that he was 'fine', even though he was nearly completely covered in bandages. Sakura, likewise, was shouting at him that he needed to rest before she punched his lights out. "Ahem." The Uchiha said dully from the doorway, and his teammates turned to face him.

"...Sasuke-kun!" The pinkette gasped, and leapt at him in a solid glomp. He ignored the unwanted affection, allowing her to nuzzle into his neck and tell him how worried she was. Naruto just rolled his eyes and snorted from his hospital bed.

"Yeah, yeah, nice to see you, too, bastard." The blonde muttered. Sakura must've shot him a look, because he stiffened and smiled, albeit tightly. "I mean, of course it's nice to see you're back! Is Neji back, too? How about Hinata?"

Sasuke just shrugged. "Neji is, but Hinata isn't. We didn't catch them. ...And the Hokage is calling off the pursuit..." The dark-haired shinobi admitted, glancing away from them both. He heard Sakura make a pained sort of gasp, and not a moment later he heard the thump signaling Naruto's

escape from the hospital bed.

"What?! They can't just ditch her like that! She's a Konoha ninja, too!" He howled, stomping over toward the doorway.

Unfortunately, he had an angry, pink-haired medic to contend with before he could yell at Tsunade. "Naruto! Get back in bed! *I'll* talk to Tsunade-shishou about this! GET IN BED NOW, YOU BLONDE IDIOT!" She ended up having to kick him, and carrying him back to lay limply on the white sheets. Sasuke left before either of them could ask him any more questions.

He'd seen them, that was enough.

But he couldn't deny it that it *was* nice to see that Naruto was recovering smoothly. Not that he'd doubted the idiot, anyway. Sasuke snorted as he walked out in the bright noon sun, shielding his eyes for a moment as they adjusted. Konoha... the village hidden in the leaves. He'd lived here all his life, with his family, then his friends, and other comrades and shinobi. He knew the layout of the city by heart, shinobi and non-shinobi parts alike. He'd graduated from the Academy here, he had become a chuunin, and later a jounin, here.

The Uchiha never liked it here, anyway.

He walked sullenly back toward his apartment, having moved out of the cursed Uchiha compound years ago. His hitai-ate was still in his backpack, but everything else was in place. He just wanted to pack a few things first.

The afternoon passed quickly as he ransacked his room for useful items. He had plenty of shuriken and kunai, especially since he preferred to use his katana over those any day. Sasuke grabbed the extra sheathe for the sword, and finally went through his drawers for clothes.

High-collared, dark-colored shirts. Nearly all of them, and most of them with the Uchiha clan symbol on the back or on a sleeve. Sasuke changed out of his mission-worn outfit, pulling on a new shirt. High, loose collar, dark blue fabric, long sleeves. Perfect. His clan symbol was emblazoned boldly on his back. He yanked on some black shorts as well, as well as some mesh sleeve-like things for his calves. Finally, bandages for his ankles, feet, wrists and hands before his ninja sandals.

Sasuke glanced out of his bedroom's window, surprised to see the sun already almost setting. It'd taken longer to go through his things than he'd planned, but he still had an hour or so to wait until it was dark outside. Might as well do something productive.

The Uchiha bought some more soldier pills and food, but decided to forgo buying more weapons or anything else. He then headed to the training grounds, activating his Sharingan. Time to copy as much ninjutsu, genjutsu and taijutsu as possible. Might as well act practical if he went through with this.

Some deity or god must've decided that Sasuke had enough problems in his life and granted him a miracle. Kakashi and Gai were fighting, full out shinobi battling. Jutsu, kunai and punches were thrown every which way. And Sasuke watched them with wide, Sharingan eyes.

His teacher shouted, "*Katon: Gokakyuu no jutsu!*" and amazed Sasuke at both the raw power invested in the fireball, and the fact that he didn't seem to scorch his mask. But he already knew the Gokakyuu; Kakashi probably got it from *him* in the first place. So that wasn't much help.

But Gai dodged effortlessly, grinning broadly. "Well played, Kakashi!" He called jovially, and

gave him his signature good-guy pose. Kakashi looked as if he couldn't care less. But then he jerked his head back, his amazingly fast hands already forming seals; Gai had created a shadow clone, and was currently streaking toward him at an even more amazing speed. Kakashi was about to release his jutsu, but instead the spandex-clad jounin ducked down, and threw his fist upward into Kakashi's jaw with ferocious strength, shouting, "*Omote Renge!*"

He then grabbed the silver-haired shinobi around the chest in a crushing bear hug, spinning as he forced them back down to earth, Kakashi's head taking most of the impact. The shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke, and just as Gai landed, a hand shot up out of the earth and grabbed his ankle. Sasuke already knew these jutsu; why didn't either of them use more powerful attacks?!

The two rival jounin continued to swap attacks, almost all of them either stupid, useless or something Sasuke had seen before. (He did *not* need to learn the *Sennen Goroshi*, and did *not* need the images of that attack, either.) He had already accidentally wasted the last hour of his life as a Konoha shinobi watching the most idiotic fight ever held between two jounin.

The sun had set; it was dusk now. Sasuke walked mechanically toward the village's eastern gate, shifting his backpack nervously. Last time he had tried this, it hadn't gone so well. But then again, now Naruto was in the hospital, and time, Neji and his own power were on his side. He was much stronger this time around. And with such a deficit of shinobi, he was pretty sure Tsunade wouldn't be able to spare that many for a rescue team, if any, and definitely not soon.

He met the stoic Hyuuga at the gates, safe in the twilight from the gate guards' probing eyes. (Plus they were only really there to keep outsiders from getting *in*, not Konoha shinobi from getting *out*.) The two activated their famed bloodline limits, adjusting for a moment before stealthily hopping onto the wall and into the forest on the other side.

There was no going back now. Sasuke was once again a missing-nin, and on his way to find his brother. In his view, Neji was just along for the ride.

Betrayal at High Speeds

Traveling for hours on end on the back of a double-winged clay hummingbird was only fun for the first few minutes. Deidara tired of it within seconds. And this was the fourth day of their race to the Rain. He busied himself (and stopped himself from annoying the silent Hyuuga) by making a few clay birds to act as their guard and playing with them. He didn't want to get caught off guard without his explosives again, especially in case it *was* the Akatsuki again. (Though he was still oddly proud of the fact that the bird they were riding on was the largest he had managed to create thus far.)

A little owl, eyes hollow, was spat out by the mouth on his left hand. Deidara looked at it for a moment, then formed a sign with his other hand, and with a puff of nin-smoke, the owl blinked up at him. He grinned, and gave it a little toss in the air before him, watching it flutter around his head. He felt the kunoichi's eyes on him, but ignored her. He was perfectly content to amuse himself with his own jutsu, thank-you-very-much.

"D-Deidara-kun...?" He barely heard her quiet voice over the wind, but perked up and turned back to look at her. (With this newer model of bird, not only were they faster, but there was much more leg room and personal space. No need for any more awkward contact!) She instantly looked down at her fingers, which were fiddling in her lap. "Wh-Why is it that you ma-make clay birds...?" she asked, the stammer, as usual, in her voice.

Deidara just smiled. "It's my art, Bya-chan. I love birds, and clay is just so... moldable, it's so fun, yeah! And the explosions they create... beautiful. Simply art, yeah?" he informed her cheerfully. She just nodded slowly. "Besides... birds are so free, they can do whatever they want, yeah. They aren't weighed down by regulations and standards and gravity..."

"I-Is that why... Is th-that why you l-left Iwagakure...?" she asked in a tiny voice. He blinked in surprise at her, though whether for her reasoning skills or because he felt it was true, he didn't know. It was his turn to nod slowly.

"Yeah... Bya-chan, how'd you figure that out?" the blonde asked bluntly. The owl stopped its fluttering, landing on his hair and nestling itself in.

The ashen-eyed girl turned red, and ducked her head down to avoid looking at him. "A-ah, I-I'm sorry, D-Deidara-kun!" she hurriedly apologized, pushing her index fingers together nervously.

He watched the habit for a moment, then asked again, "No, it's fine, yeah. I just want to know how you figured that out?"

"U-Um... My-my cousin... He i-is sort of li-like that... I mean, h-he is like a-a bird, he l-longs for freedom..." Her voice got smaller and smaller until he had to lean backward to hear her properly.

"Your cousin. Is he that Hyuuga kid, Neji?" Once again, his bluntness seemed to have surprised (or embarrassed) her. She bobbed her head once, bringing up her hands to partly cover her face. "So that's why you called him 'Neji-niisan'. You're cousins, yeah... I guess you two must like each other a lot then, eh?" Deidara grinned at her from his upside-down position from leaning back too far, and if anything, she turned even redder.

"N-N-No!" the Hyuuga heiress insisted, shaking her head. Deidara watched her hair flutter about her shoulders in the wind for a moment, keeping the grin on his face. "It's not l-like that! I-I just l-look up to him, Neji-niisan's ju-just so strong a-and c-confident and he'll pr-protect me!" She was

nearly shaking as her face got steadily darker, so Deidara decided to give her a break and change the subject.

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry, yeah. Didn't mean it like that, Bya-chan!" He laughed sheepishly, and had the little clay owl hop over to land on her shoulder, nuzzling her neck through her hair. She seemed to appreciate the small token of kindness, reaching up with one hand to pet it with one finger. "Oh... and Bya-chan? *I'll* protect you, too, yeah."

The blue-eyed shinobi had no idea what possessed him to say that, and he was rapidly turning the same shade of red she was. So he hastily straightened back up so his back was to her, but let her keep his owl back there for company. *Oh, for—Why do I say such stupid things? Now she'll probably think I'm coming on to her... damn, am I? I thought shinobi were supposed to be emotionless, not emotionally confused!* he angsted mentally as he cast around for some safe topic to break the incredibly awkward silence.

"Um... D-Deidara-kun, how d-do you make these l-little clay animals...?" she asked instead, and he eagerly pounced on the subject.

"I-It's quite easy, yeah! You just infuse your chakra into the clay, which is why I have these!" He leaned back so was looking at her upside-down again. Deidara stuck one of his hands in the air in front of her, sticking the tongue out of that mouth. "And then you just form the seal to make it bigger and give it life, yeah!"

"B-But I don't have those... on my hands..." she said quietly, watching the mouth warily. He noticed this, but made sure the cheerful smile on his face didn't waver.

"Oh, well that could be a problem... but don't you already have good chakra control, yeah? 'Cause you're a Hyuuga?" the explosives expert pointed out, and she brightened slightly. "And you don't necessarily *need* these... it just makes things a lot easier and faster, yeah!"

The unlikely pair spent the next two and a half hours teaching the Hyuuga how to manually mold the clay into the particular shape she wanted, and how to infuse her chakra into it. The end result was a little, sort-of lopsided dove-looking bird sitting in her lap contentedly. (Unfortunately, it didn't look like it could fly very well.) "—And to detonate it, if you ever want to, yeah, you just form this sign and say '*Katsu*'," Deidara told her triumphantly. She smiled, a true smile, and stroked the bird's unfeathered head with her finger.

"Th-Thank you, D-Deidara-kun..." She cupped her hands underneath it, and lifted it to her eye level. The dove just stared evenly back at her from its hollow eyes. Then it flapped its nearly-useless wings once and opened its beak in a silent chirp at her.

"So then, Bya-chan... Hey, I have a question, yeah." He suddenly became bright-eyed and curious, turning around so he was kneeling in front of her. "About your Byakugan and the chakra system. Is each shinobi's system, uh, unique, yeah? Could you tell me apart from your cousin based on just that?" It was a question that had been nagging at him from the back of his mind for awhile now, and truthfully, he had been curious about her bloodline limit ever since he learned that she had it.

"Um... there a-are *some* differences, yes... b-but usually n-not enough to tell th-the difference between shinobi... Un-unless you have a very skilled B-Byakugan." Her smiled disappeared, and it almost sounded like she was reciting something. Deidara cocked his head and frowned slightly, but his curiosity about the Byakugan won out.

"Some differences like what, yeah?"

"L-Like... your ch-chakra amount. S-Some shinobi have m-more chakra than others, so..."

"Oh, yeah, right. Of course. So then..." Deidara took a breath, and leaned forward for one of his main questions. "What does it *look* like, yeah? The chakra circulation system?"

She seemed taken aback by the inquiry, leaning back on her heels a bit from his sudden proximity. "Um..." The Hyuuga activated her famed eyes, and continued looking at him. "L-Like little blue streams o-of water flowing around... li-like blood vessels..." His face fell; he had been hoping for something cooler and more interesting than watery blood.

-.-.-

Hinata was a bit surprised at his sudden interest in the chakra circulatory system, though at the same time, she was somewhat put out by his fallen expression. Plus, he didn't seem to be interested in a shinobi way-or even an academic way. Gathering her courage, she asked, "Wh-Why do y-you ask...?"

"Well, you always—used to, yeah, block my system. And all you did was poke me in the stomach with some chakra," Deidara said casually, shrugging. The Hyuuga's heiress nearly fumed; it wasn't as easy as he made it sound, and it was definitely more refined than that! "Plus, it never seemed to last that long, anyway. I was just wondering if it was some sort of neat chemical reaction or something...yeah."

"I-It's not! The Hyuuga clan has refined th-that system of attack for-for centuries!" Hinata burst out. He blinked in amused surprise. "A-And I'm not even performing it right! Your chakra is mostly s-stored here," she paused to point to her stomach, "And I-I was just blocking one or two of the v-vessels heading out of it. That's why you were able to o-overcome it so easily! If-If I were to close all of th-them, you would b-be unable to fight for days!" She was used to people degrading her and her skills, as a person, but no one dared put down the Hyuuga clan in front of her. It wasn't her fault that she was the weakest; in more capable hands, the Byakugan and the *Juuken* created a very powerful fighting style.

The blonde explosives expert didn't seem too surprised by her outburst, even after, panting, she began her usual mortified blushing. "So *that's* the Hyuuga's fighting style, yeah. You close up the chakra system with your own, foreign, chakra, and you see that with your Byakugan... That's really neat, Bya-chan." He grinned as she paled.

Oh... Oh my goodness... I-I've just done the unthinkable! I've given away the Hyuuga's secret freely! He-He tricked me! But calm down, Hinata, it means nothing to him, he could have deducted it fighting Neji-niisan later, and it's worthless without the Byakugan, she told herself, having to force herself to keep breathing. Still, it killed her mood; just how stupid was she, giving that away like that?

But Deidara would not be forgotten, even in her self-pity. "So the Byakugan allows someone—a Hyuuga—to see the chakra circulatory system... But... all it really is is forcing your own chakra into your opponent's body... The chakra can't be the size of blood vessels, so if you just strike at random you'd be bound to hit at least a few... yeah..."

"N-No, d-don't s-say things li-like that!" Hinata wailed, feeling her eyes sting with tears. Here he was, an enemy ninja probably not a year older than her, figuring out a counter-strategy to the

Juuken in front of her eyes! It wasn't only shameful, it was a calamity if this ever got back to Konoha. She bit her lip and brought up her closed fists to hide her face.

Still, he continued, "So then, if you just keep pumping enough chakra into your opponent's body, even without the Byakugan, it'll become a battle of chakra... And if you win, then the other shinobi's chakra is shut down, yeah." He looked like a kid on Christmas.

The ashen-eyed kunoichi stifled a whimper, gathering her own chakra into her hand. She'd have to do *something* if he kept this up. But then, the unthinkable happened. She glanced up, Byakugan having turned off as she began crying, and saw Deidara experimenting with his own chakra in his hand. Turning the bloodline limit back on, she was shocked to see that he had managed to pull it into the same form as most of the Hyuuga clan did. Past promise forgotten, Hinata decided that any information she could gather on the Akatsuki wasn't worth giving up the Hyuuga's *Juuken*. Her father had always told her, as a child, that loyalty to the clan came before loyalty to the village.

"...But then it would only be a simple matter to overcome the Byakugan... Memorization can work in place of actual sight, yeah. It probably wouldn't work very well in actual combat, but in stealth it could be invaluable..." Deidara seemed lost in thought, staring at his hand, primarily at the tongue sticking out of it. Tear-filled eyes widened, and Hinata realized that she would have to shut him up. If he was allowed to muse any further on the subject, it would be disastrous—particularly if he ever fought Neji again, or if the Akatsuki and other crime organizations learned of it.

Plus, it more than scared her that he was absolutely right in all of his deductions thus far. You *didn't* need the Byakugan to perform the *Juuken* fighting style, but it was nearly impossible to hit a moving target without it. But Deidara had already copied the chakra use, figured out enough of its secrets to give her the shivers, and the scariest part was the maniacal grin on his face. She had never seen any shinobi with that sort of look on their face, let alone Deidara—the cheerful, friendly, polite protector—kidnapper.

She felt a tear slide down her cheek as she pictured the next time Neji confronted him. He would know that she had somehow led the explosives expert to the defeat of the *Juuken* and Byakugan, or even worse, he'd think that she betrayed the clan... "*Hinata-sama, how could you?! You've betrayed the Hyuuga!*" he shouted in her mind's eye. Spurred on by her inbred loyalty, she squeezed shut her eyes and thrust her chakra-laden hand out to where his heart would be.

He—her mind stopped abruptly, eyes snapping open. The simple fact that his arm was longer than hers was the only thing that penetrated her paralyzed thoughts. Palm still glowing faintly with his chakra, pressed over her own heart, Deidara's hair was shielding his face from her view. (She didn't even have time to think about that dreaded *kiss* issue that kept popping up.) He had used the gentle fist on her. Hinata opened her mouth feebly, to ask *why*, or perhaps *how*...but all that came out was a weak cough and blood.

Then the *Henge* wore off and an impassive face, framed by black bangs, with blood red eyes stared back at her as her world faded black and she fell off the bird.

Things of Nightmares

Deidara caught the Hyuuga—barely. (If you call 'barely' catching her accidentally when trying to catch up to his own bird and having the sudden weight push them both over the edge and nearly missing the bird as it circled down to catch them again.) He stared, wide-eyed, at her body. She had blood coming out of her mouth, and her eyes were closed. She looked, in short, dead. The blonde swore loudly, frowning as he glared up at his former bird and the man standing on top of it. He was wearing a black cloak with red clouds.

"She was weak," he called down to him dispassionately. Deidara bit back a snarl and ignored him for the moment. He carefully laid the dark-haired girl down, forming the seals for a healing jutsu. Fuming, he did the best he could to her heart, silently calling in the other bird he had out. As he finished up on the Hyuuga girl, he swung his arm over his shoulder, and the clay pelted toward the black-haired shinobi. It exploded upon contact, but Deidara knew it wouldn't do anything. He was already in the air, swinging himself up beside the other on the back of the bird as the smoke cleared.

Deidara faced the man's back, kunai drawn in one hand, the other chewing hurriedly another few pieces of clay. "Where's your partner, yeah?" he asked harshly, focusing his hawk-eye on the man's face. It was lined, but he didn't appear that old (perhaps about Deidara's own age). But the blonde's breath caught when he noticed the eyes. Definite Sharingan. "Uchiha..." he breathed inaudibly. The man just brushed back a longer lock of his black hair, glaring boredly at him.

"Waiting for your other bird to land to get to your partner. But I've already taken care of her. She was weak," he repeated quietly, nodding slowly. "And I believe my partner is now currently planning the best course for his water jutsu to take to take out the bird below us."

Deidara half-growled at the Uchiha, but as he glanced down, he already saw a powerful jet of water coursing up toward the hovering clay and the Hyuuga kunoichi. The Iwa-nin jumped down, narrowly missing one of the bird's wings, and called his other jutsu out of the attack range as it caught him. He soared down toward the sparse forest below them, spotting the other Akatsuki member instantly; a tall, dark-haired man wearing the infamous cloak. The girl beside him was already stirring, but frankly, Deidara had no idea how she would fare in this battle. But he didn't have much of a choice otherwise. "Bya-chan, wake up." She blinked blearily at him, but as her eyes focused, she became instantly alert again.

"Y-You!" the lavender-eyed kunoichi spat, Byakugan activating itself. "You di-did—"

"It wasn't me, yeah. It was that Uchiha Akatsuki member, using a *Henge*. Come on, Bya-chan, we have a fight here, and I can't have you attacking me," he pleaded hastily, backing up as she tried to hit him. "It was a *Henge*! The Uchiha was just copying your moves with the Sharingan, he didn't do anything else! I healed you, yeah! Now we need to fight him and his partner."

She looked at him warily for a moment, but as another jet of water streaked past, she evidently decided to believe him. Unfortunately, some type of courage had possessed her. The Hyuuga girl jumped off the bird, landing deftly beside the other shinobi.

"BYA-CHAN!" Deidara howled, following her. The larger ninja had taken out a *huge* sword, and would've hit her with it if he hadn't landed squarely on the man's head. Of course, he didn't appreciate that very much, and instead swung the bandaged sword up to try to hit him. The blonde flipped backwards, but the second his feet touched the ground, he kicked off again and tackled his opponent.

Unfortunately, the Akatsuki shinobi appeared to be much stronger than he had anticipated. A full-out tackle did nothing but sway the larger man, though he did drop his sword. He turned, picking Deidara up by the back of his shirt, and grinned. His teeth were more like fangs, though the surprising part was his blue skin and *gills*. The blonde couldn't help but blink in shock at him. "Well aren't you a little one?" he asked, as if it was a mere introduction. "Not much taller than her." With his free hand he jerked his thumb toward the kunoichi, who was standing at the ready, Byakugan blazing.

Luckily, even though he was physically stronger than him, Deidara's grin threw him off long enough for the spider nestled in his hair to detonate.

-.-.-

Hinata frowned, jumping back slightly as the man and Deidara both exploded. They didn't, per se, but as the smoke cleared, the blue-haired man didn't seem nearly as friendly as he had earlier. Though there was blood painting about half of his face red, still trickling down from under his scored Kiri hitai-ate. Deidara grinned sheepishly, shrugging in the man's grasp. He growled, and threw him to the ground, hefting his sword again. But the blonde flipped out of the way of his foot as it came crashing down. This time he landed beside her, panting slightly but grinning. "You're strong, yeah," he stated easily. Hinata couldn't help but think that this was a bit obvious.

He glanced at her, and she nodded imperceptibly. Hinata charged forward, forcing chakra into both hands and her feet, jumping easily over the man's sword and thrusting her hand at his head. But he ducked, and her fingers just barely brushed his navy hair. Instead, she planted her other foot on the back of his neck, kicking downward as hard as she could. At the same time, she saw Deidara behind her streak toward them, letting loose a barrage of kunai and shuriken as he threw little bits of clay into the air at the same time. In miniature puffs of smoke, there were now two birds and a spider. She also noticed that he hurriedly crammed a mouthful of clay into the mouth on his head, still grinning.

The man stumbled forward from her kick, but reeled back a moment later from an elbow to the face. The blue Akatsuki member doubled over again from a kick to the stomach. Hinata couldn't help but think, *this is easy...*

Unfortunately, it appeared to be a ruse for them. While he was doubled over, he snickered, and swung his sword out at an unsuspecting Deidara. The strange sword caught him in the side, but luckily it seemed too blunt to actually cut him. Hinata was caught, momentarily, between sighing with relief and screaming. Because the blonde swayed as the blade ripped away from him, and his side was covered in blood regardless. "Wh-What was that...? Yeah?" he mumbled, one arm going unconsciously up to try to stem the blood flow.

"Samehada," the man stated proudly, setting it on his shoulder loosely. "Feeling a bit drained? Samehada *loves* chakra." He grinned like a predator sizing up its prey. But Hinata was behind the man; he appeared to be ignoring her, either to gloat or in some sexist attitude. She narrowed her eyes slightly, but realized this could be her chance. He was barely grasping the sword, she could easily take it, or she could cut off his chakra completely with the *Hakke Rokujuuyon Sho*. Closing all of his tenketsu points would undoubtedly be more effective, both in the short and long run, but it would also take more time. If she were to just grab the sword and run, it wouldn't take a second.

Hinata hated decisions like this. Sure, it was so much easier in the Academy, but this was real life,

with real lives on the line. She bit her lip, but then noticed that the Samehada had its own, bizarre chakra flow. That made her make her choice, and she focused on the shark-man's chakra system. Imagining the yin-yang symbol below her, with the range of attack she needed, the Hyuuga heiress charged.

She got to four hits before the man even really noticed. But by then it was too late for him. Pumped with adrenaline and chakra, Hinata just kept hitting the tenketsu, ignoring the one scrape he got in with his sword. After thirty-two, he could barely stand. Sixty-four palms done, the man collapsed limply, his sword grazing her leg as it fell beside him. Hinata was panting and shaking slightly, though more from the excitement than exhaustion. "Y-You..." the man growled into the ground, trying to get back to his feet. She stepped hesitantly back, holding her shoulder where he hit her with his strange Samehada, and favoring her other leg.

She felt drained from that. *But it was worth it, wasn't it?* a little voice in her mind asked innocently. *You saved Deidara-kun and now there's only one enemy left.* Indeed, the dark-haired Konoha-nin looked up, smiling weakly. Deidara's face was pure shock, though more than a bit fright at her sudden, rather harsh, attack. "Th-That's the true power of the Byakugan, yeah?" She just nodded, proudly.

-.-.-

Deidara couldn't help but stare. Sure, the girl was a Hyuuga, and a Konoha chuunin, and the man had had his back to her at the time, but he wasn't expecting anything like *that*. (True as well, the man was slowly trying to stagger back to his feet, but for the moment and for awhile, he was out of the fight.) Mechanically, the blonde waved his arm and sent two of his birds up to watch the Uchiha above them, and walked stiffly over toward the cloaked Kiri-nin. Better to kill him now and be done with it, lest they have to fight the stronger man and his weird sword again later.

But he heard an explosion overhead, and a moment later the Uchiha was standing protectively between he and his partner. The other clay creature fluttered back down to hover over Deidara's head, waiting for a command. (Luckily, Deidara could also still use the larger one from before. It was circling over them all silently at the moment.)

"...Uchiha. Why do I always have to fight the Uchiha, yeah?" Predictably, the man's red eyes widened, nearly imperceptibly. Carefully arrogant, Deidara continued, "But this ought to be easy, right, Bya-chan? I mean, the last Uchiha we fought was taken out pretty quickly, yeah."

He ducked just in time to dodge the kunai thrown at his head, but he saw several blonde hairs float down in front of his eyes. "Do not underestimate me, especially compared to my foolish little brother," the man deadpanned, but there was a very strong underlying anger to his words. He stood between Deidara and the blue man, but at the same time, Hinata was behind him. She shifted slightly, but he sent her a message with his eye: *don't attack. He'll be expecting it.*

But still, Deidara had no idea how this man would rank against his little brother. He had successfully fooled the Byakugan and copied the Hyuuga with his Sharingan—with a blink, Deidara noticed something. His Sharingan was... different, somehow, from Sasuke's. He zoomed in with his scope. Instead of the three normal pupils, it appeared his was... different. More solid, somehow. And definitely stronger.

He threw a pair of kunai at the other man, and surprisingly the Uchiha didn't block them from his

partner. Narrowing his visible eye slightly, Deidara shouted, "*Kage Bunshin no jutsu*," and instantly lunged at the man with two clones. One of the clones caught him around the waist, while the other jumped over him and yanked him backward by the ponytail. The real Iwa-nin ducked low and swept his feet out from under him, then grabbed one of the ankles, and flipped the black-haired shinobi over his head. He smacked into the ground face-first with a satisfying crunch.

The man twisted around and fired some sort of fire jutsu, and Deidara barely had time to switch places with one of his clones. But it gave him the opportunity to land a rather solid punch on his cheek. The shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke, and so did the blonde's other *Bunshin* as the real Uchiha decapitated it from behind. "I am getting bored of this. You are both weak," he stated in a monotone, dodging easily as the Hyuuga kunoichi came up behind him with a chakra-filled fist. He grabbed the back of her jacket and hauled her easily into the air, even though he wasn't much taller than her.

"Bya-chan! *Katsu!*" he half-yelped, and the spider attached to the Uchiha's cloak detonated. Even the infamous Akatsuki didn't appear to be able to notice every attack before it happened. The man hissed a curse, turning on Deidara with the first real glare he'd seen out of him. "I was tired of your blank expression, yeah." He sneered in return, and called down his larger bird to attack as well. The large explosion caused smoke to swell all around the clearing, but it also gave time for Deidara to locate his own partner. After placing her safely away (with a squeak on her part), he decided to go over and try to finish off the swordsman.

As the smoke cleared, the Uchiha found the blonde stomping (literally) on the back of his partner. Deidara grinned at the murderous intent he suddenly felt to his left, and turned to face his opponent. But the second he reopened his eye to say something, a red moon rose and the color bled out of the world.

Hinata looked nervously at Deidara, whose face had lost almost all of its color. And not a moment later, with a pitiful grunt, he pitched forward limply. The Uchiha (*Sasuke's older brother!?*) calmly pulled out a kunai from the pouch on his leg, throwing it carelessly at Deidara's body. The cobalt-haired girl threw her own to block it, running out to stand protectively between them.

Sasuke's brother merely stared at her. "...Hyuuga," he said after an agonizingly long moment, but Hinata didn't reply. If he *was* an Uchiha, of course he already knew all about the Hyuuga. Plus, that had been him on the bird from before. "Do you know Uzumaki Naruto?"

That question, however, caught her off guard. Her eyes widened from their glare, and she let her fighting stance fall. "N-Naruto-kun...?" she breathed. *H-How does he know Naruto-kun?! Has he fought him before? Is-Is Naruto-kun in trouble...?* Her mind demanded action, but her body remained frozen at the mere sound of his name.

"The Hyuuga who loved the Kyuubi..." She had no idea what the Kyuubi demon had to do with her crush, but it appeared to be a great curiosity to the Uchiha. "...Hyuuga Hinata. Former member of Team 8 under Yuuhi Kurenai. Teammate of Inuzuka Kiba and Aburame Shino. The Hyuuga's heir..." The shadow of a smirk graced his features. Hinata, however, broke out in a cold sweat. *Juuken* stance forgotten, she couldn't help but shrink in upon herself, one fist absently going up in front of her mouth. *How* did he know so much about her? If he was Sasuke's older brother, he defected out of the village years ago...

"N-No..." she whimpered helplessly, instantly fearing for her friends' welfare. Was this some sort of threat?

"Oldest daughter of Hyuuga Hiashi. Older sister to Hyuuga Hanabi. Cousin and under the protection of Hyuuga Neji," he continued smoothly, whereas with every word, Hinata drew closer to a breakdown. It didn't help that the sheer killing intent the man was emitting made her want to cry. "And now, apparently, a missing-nin from Konoha and partner of that pathetic man." He pointed with a casual finger at Deidara, who was still slumped on the ground. (Even as he said that, however, the blonde groaned and twitched.) "You're a disgrace. Why are you even here? I could kill you now and no one would miss you."

"N-No... Th-That's a l-lie..." she whispered feebly, on the verge of tears. It was her first chuunin exam all over again. Feelings of insecurity and uselessness rushed back into her mind, only this time it was much worse. She saw Neji in the Uchiha's place, telling her how useless and unfit to be the Hyuuga heir she was.

"You only managed to get Kisame because of sheer luck and a mistake on his part. And even then, look at you. Wounded, pathetic," he continued in a cold, flat voice. Just like Neji had used. "Trying to act stronger than you are, trying to change yourself, and for what? Reduced to tears by a few words." Hinata shook her head desperately, trying to get his voice out of her head. It wasn't Neji saying these cruel things anymore, it was an enemy, it was all lies...

"N-No... Yo-you're only sa-saying tha-that b-because you're t-too exhausted to fi-fight me..." she pleaded, as if she could either change of their minds. But according to her Byakugan, it was at least partly true. Whatever he had done to Deidara had taken up a lot of chakra. The weeping kunoichi looked back up at him, and was momentarily surprised to see a dark glare and an increase of chakra around his eyes.

Then, all of a sudden, her Byakugan was shut off and the color of the world warped around her. The moon hung overhead, blood red, casting a dull glow on everything. She found herself suddenly bound (with cloth bandages she could not seem to break) to a large metal cross, tightly tied by her wrists, ankles, waist and neck. She struggled in vain against it, but a loud, monotonous voice she recognized as the Uchiha's filled the air. *"You will not escape. Welcome to Tsukuyomi. This is my world. For the next three days you will be at my mercy, Hyuuga Hinata."*

It's a genjutsu, she thought hurriedly, trying to stay calm. *I'll be able to break out of it in a few moments, just stay calm...*

"You will not escape this genjutsu." The voice rang out again, louder than before. And suddenly the man was standing in front of her, glaring coldly up into her eyes. One arm was casually held inside his cloak, but the other was holding a katana. *"Seventy-two hours to go."*

Hinata screamed in pain as he plunged the sword into her stomach, wrenching it upward. She tried to get away, but the bindings kept her firmly in place. Blood coursed down her stomach and dripped off her legs, and she couldn't help but wonder why she wasn't bleeding to death. He finally took the katana out of her body, but only stabbed her again, dragging it across her side as she screamed. The pain was agonizing, but she didn't seem to die or be able to dispel the genjutsu. (The only thing keeping her somewhat sane was the mantra *It's just genjutsu, it's just genjutsu, it's just genjutsu...*)

It must have been hours, it *felt* like hours, and the cruel Uchiha vanished. She panted, wishing her tears away, but also thankful for the break. What came next was even worse.

Naruto, Neji and Sasuke stood before her, in a sort of a half-circle. At least, their younger selves

did, and suddenly she felt herself younger as well. Chuunin exam all over again. Each had their arms crossed and a look of disgust on their faces. Even without speaking, she knew what they were thinking. "N-No! Th-this isn't m-my fault! I-I-I'm n-not weak! I-I c-couldn't help i-it!"

"*You're weak. I can't believe I had accepted you,*" Neji said in his old, cruel, condescending voice. "*You're not fit to be a Hyuuga.*"

"*She's not fit to have the Byakugan. Or any bloodline limit. She's just a pathetic kunoichi.*" Sasuke turned his head away from her, as if in revulsion.

"*She's not fit to be a Konoha kunoichi, a kunoichi at all. Girls are supposed to have actual skills, not have freaky eyes and tap people,*" Naruto added, and Hinata finally burst into tears all over again. True, Sasuke she never knew very well, but he was part of the Rookie 9—part of her rescue team—part of Naruto's team—and his words still cut her. But not nearly as deeply as Naruto's casually cruel statements. She shook her head desperately, body racked with sobs and tears, trying to get the words out of her mind. (Neji hurt her even worse... she never got over their fight the first time, this only rubbed salt in the wounds...)

She jumped slightly, watching through her tears as all three shinobi's eyes suddenly faded into a dark red. Sasuke's was the Sharingan, that she knew—but seeing her beloved cousin, whose Byakugan she knew so well, with eyes the color of blood... Hinata recoiled, turning her head away from him, as well as her restraints would allow. But that only forced her to see Naruto's eyes-slitted pupils, dark red in color. Even more frightening; he was growing *fangs* and *claws*—and *ears and tails*. The trapped Hyuuga was too horrified to look away as Naruto, the loveable, cheerful blonde she had always admired, turned into some terrible monster...

Then he attacked her.

-.-.-

The torture went on for days. The first day appeared to be solely devoted to 'introducing' her to the world, the one that the cruel bastard of an Uchiha controlled. Which, unfortunately, involved completely breaking—no, *shattering*—her will, emotional strength, and any confidence she had in her rescuers and her ex-crush. Yesterday he seemed fine with her broken spirit, and toyed around with the joys of physical pain. He enjoyed using his katana, and even worse, enjoyed making people in her life hurt her.

Hinata had been decapitated, stabbed, disemboweled, dismembered, melted, bruised and she knew she was going to have nightmares about this horrible, terrible, cruel genjutsu for the rest of her life. If she even survived it. By now, she was doubtful of that. Surely her body's shock to this sort of treatment would kill her.

Even after that time, she still screamed and shouted when the pain hit her. She had given up talking, or even pleading, and she had no more tears to cry. The tormented kunoichi shrieked hoarsely as that horrible demon-like Naruto slashed at her, snarling savagely. She had no idea where his strange, animal-like looks came from or where the Uchiha had gotten them, but to her, it was the thing of nightmares. Hinata choked back a dry sob that slipped into another scream as he raked his claws over her face.

The horrendous Naruto disappeared, but was unfortunately replaced by her cousin. This time his

eyes were their normal, cold (*haven't they always been cold toward me?* she thought dully) white. He was holding a katana, either Sasuke's or his brother's. She didn't care whose, the heiress just flinched away from him, as much as her bindings would allow. "*Pitiful weakling,*" he hissed emotionlessly, hefting the blade into a fighting stance. Hinata found herself unable to look away as he plunged it into her stomach, but strangely, he pulled it out not a second later. Neji wiped the blood—*her* blood—off on her hair, then glanced upward toward the scarlet moon. She couldn't help but follow his gaze, but it appeared to be a ruse. The second her chin tilted up, he jumped up into the air, silently as a good shinobi should, blade pointing down.

She opened her mouth in a silent scream as the katana slammed down into her skull, surely killing her, with unbelievable pain—

But then the color rushed back into her vision, and she felt herself free. Hinata took a gasp of air, blinking in the suddenly harsh light of the sun (*the sun, oh, it's so wonderful,* she couldn't help thinking graciously). But then the shock to her body caught up with her, and yet again, because of that Uchiha bastard, she pitched forward. This time the darkness seemed even more bent on keeping her. But after that, Hinata wasn't sure she wanted to wake up again.

Shinobi Training Pays Off

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Itachi snorted delicately at the fallen kunoichi. Weak. It was really pathetic, the standard of ninja Konoha was allowing these days. But he felt that he would be doing his part to eliminate this girl (who had fallen merely to a few mind tricks—hah!) to help better the future of shinobi-kind. Kisame was *finally* getting to his feet. "Honestly, Kisame. With your amount of chakra that shouldn't have done a thing..." the Uchiha muttered, sighing again. His blue-skinned partner just offered a growl in his general direction, retrieving his sword.

"I'm gonna finish off that girl," he added to the rumble, hefting Samehada. He didn't look happy, so Itachi shrugged and backed off. (The Sharingan master hadn't wanted to waste a kunai—definitely not any more chakra—on her, anyway.) He instead stepped over toward the unconscious blonde. Deidara. The potential Akatsuki, wasn't it? Itachi prodded his head with his foot, curling his lip in distaste. If all it took was one *Tsukuyomi*... foolish weakling. He should have known better than to mess with the red clouds. "Itachi, can I eat her?"

"I don't care. I don't want to see it," the dark-haired missing-nin replied boredly, rolling his eyes as they returned to their normal black coloring. Even if he wouldn't admit it, using the *Tsukuyomi* twice in a row like that was a bit tiring, and it irked him how he wasted his chakra like that on these two mediocre shinobi. (Though torment *was* fun.)

But then Itachi felt a barely suppressed chakra behind them, and his eyes widened.

Deidara could hold it no longer, and let his *Kage Bunshin* dissipate in a small puff of smoke. The Uchiha—*Itachi*? he thought vaguely—had noticed him before and was already running, his long ponytail streaming out behind him. The blonde snickered, thinking, *And people call me girly...*

The shark-man didn't appear as easily beaten as before, either. He turned around and swung his sword blindly behind him, nearly giving Deidara a haircut. But he had ducked just in time, and darted forward with a clay owl as quickly as he could, shoving it in the swordsman's face and shouted, "*Katsu!*" His jutsu detonated, probably taking about half of the man's head with it. But instead, the blonde's eye widened as it disappeared in its own puff of nin-smoke.

"*Suiton: Bakusui Shoha no jutsu!*" Deidara didn't even have time to look around before he connected bodily with the nearest tree from the force of the water. Pushing himself back, the Iwa-nin couldn't help but be astounded; the fight was suddenly being held in water, waist high. Water created from *nothing*. He had never heard of such a thing being done, especially in a combat situation.

But more important was his victim who was suddenly submerged in several feet of water.

His last clay bird hit the water's surface like a bullet, making a loud *crack*. A moment later it fluttered wetly back into the air, carrying the unconscious Hyuuga in its talons. Deidara watched it go, somewhat disappointed that she actually was out of the battle, but then the call of, "*Suiton*:"

Goshokuzame no jutsu!" His head snapped around to glare at the Kiri-nin, but he didn't get to complete the process; something very sharp clamped around his leg and dragged him under the water. Once he was done splashing and flailing, Deidara was yet again astounded. It was a *shark* (that appeared to be made of some sort of water) who was carrying him off, and several others were swimming toward him. In spite of himself, he couldn't help but grin. The Akatsuki really was incredible.

Still grinning gleefully, Deidara tried stabbing one of the nearer sharks with a kunai. It did nothing. He had no more useable clay, enough kunai and shuriken for only one final barrage, only one bird, his side was still bleeding and now his leg was in great pain. (Though he still had his ace in the hole.) He couldn't believe it. Now he was sure of it. He *needed* to get into the Akatsuki. Hands on autopilot for the seals, he used a *Kawarimi* to switch places with one of the other sharks, and swam silently around in search of either the Uchiha or shark-man. *I feel like a fish... yeah*, he couldn't help but think, scanning the surface of the water for feet.

Finally, he spotted some. Deidara swam as gracefully as he could over toward them, though he was an *Iwa-nin*, damn it, he wasn't meant for water! He was meant for clay and explosions and rocks and the earth. (Though even as he thought that, he knew he was contradicting himself. He loved the sky and wind more than anything else.) He reached up out of the water and grabbed the hopefully unsuspecting shinobi's ankle, yanking down with as much force as he could.

Apparently the Uchiha hadn't thought Deidara would be stupid enough to actually try to attack from below, because he came down into the water kicking and splashing. Pressing his advantage, he forced them both deeper into the rather shallow water, using his own body weight and chakra to get them to the submerged grass below. Deidara began stabbing wildly with a kunai, but Itachi grabbed it out of his hand, cutting his own palm in the process. Desperate not to give his opponent another weapon, he clamped his teeth down on the metal ring, not letting go. With his other hand he reached for whatever he could grab—which turned out to be a fistful of hair and the side of his hitai-ate. Pulling, the headband let go but the hair didn't. Instead, it appeared that he managed to pull the Uchiha's hair out of its ponytail, which only floated gently around them and unfortunately partially obstructed their sight of each other.

In retaliation, Itachi let loose an angry stream of bubbles, his eyes turning red again. Since he didn't have a handy *Kage Bunshin*, Deidara gasped (not a fun thing to do while under water, either) and shut his eyes. It must have just been some sort of ruse, though, because he felt the kunai get yanked out of his hand's mouth, and felt it graze his cheek a moment later. (It was hard to aim properly with the water's gentle friction.) Forgetting all proper shinobi conduct (*that hurt, damn it!* he justified) Deidara simply shifted, elbowed Itachi in the face and yanked his head forward at the same time by his hair. Nose bleeding, the Konoha-nin snarled silently and reached for Deidara's own hair (the blonde couldn't help but think back to another hair-pulling contest he had had recently), but he slowly jerked his head back. The purple nails scraped the metal of his hitai-ate, and slid down to scratch his cheek over the kunai cut.

Deidara had just been *scratched* by an Akatsuki shinobi. He lost a bit of respect for them, but gained it back quickly when the knee made contact with his stomach. His last bit of air escaped his lungs, and the blonde found himself quite suddenly without oxygen. Sensing this, Itachi wrapped one hand around his neck, dragging him back down into the water, while his other arm grabbed one of his wrists and kept it away from the kunai, where it had fallen to their left. The hand around his neck pulled his hair for good measure, but Deidara was too busy trying to swim upward with double his weight to react.

But then the water drained away.

Suddenly lying on top of the Uchiha in a puddle, Deidara reared back and gasped for air. His hair stuck wetly to his face, but both of his hands were unable to wipe it out of his eyes. Irrked by that minor inconvenience, the Iwa-nin jerked his arm away from the Uchiha's iron grasp, and instead of correcting his wet hair, he grabbed Itachi's throat. *No one* tried to *drown* an Iwa-nin! (Even as a rogue, he still had some semblance of past loyalty to his village.) Deidara probably would've strangled his opponent then and there, if a large hand hadn't picked him up by the back of his soaked shirt. He blinked and wiped a lock of hair out of his eye, suddenly looking into a pair of smug-looking yellow ones. "Itachi, he's not even that cute. Now *why* were you two rolling around, sopping wet, all over each other...?" the shark-man asked, barely restraining a laugh.

Deidara tried to punch him, but he dodged easily. Itachi, evidently, tried to attack him as well, but with a jerk to the left, he and the blue-haired shinobi were out of that harm as well. "Kisame, you are an *idiot*. Now slit his throat and go find the Hyuuga," the Uchiha hissed dangerously.

Frowning slightly, the waterlogged explosives expert decided he couldn't let them find the unconscious girl. Plus, both men were within a meter, so this would be the opportune moment for an exploding clone. Stealthily switching his body with a *Kage Bunshin* (with the last of his chakra), Deidara high-tailed it out of there, looking for wherever his bird and his kunoichi victim were hiding. "*Katsu...* yeah," he muttered, smirking to himself as he heard the massive explosion. It probably wouldn't have killed either of them, unless he was extremely lucky, but they were probably both pretty hurt and intensely hating him right now.

He found his last clay bird sitting in a branch, watching him expectantly. The Hyuuga was laying folded over the same branch, arms, legs and hair hanging limply. Like a good shinobi, Deidara gave her a quick check-up, but could only bandage her shoulder and leg, as he couldn't perform any medical jutsu. It would hold until either she woke up (*if she woke up*, a mean little voice told him) or he recovered his chakra. Hopefully. But the bird was a bigger problem. Or, more accurately, a smaller one. It wasn't large enough to carry both of them (it was hardly big enough to carry one), and without any more chakra, the blonde couldn't make it bigger.

So he was stuck giving her an impromptu piggy-back ride, the clay bird floating along behind them, carrying their backpacks. It was the only thing standing between them and death if they got jumped by those Akatsuki again.

--.-

Deidara kept walking through the night, partly adrenaline, partly shinobi instincts (and partly soldier pills) keeping him awake. He needed to find an inn or something to rest at. Or at least some place with some medic-nin willing to heal them for whatever money they had left. Maybe both. Eyelid drooping, he forced himself to keep walking and pay attention. He needed to scan the sparse forest for lights and needed to hear for running water. Running water meant river and river meant clay. He wasn't sure which he wanted to find more.

He trudged on, only dimly aware that since he couldn't fly them, it would make their time limit on this obstacle course (*of course, of course fighting the Akatsuki would be the obstacles... why wouldn't it be?* he asked himself repeatedly) extremely difficult.

Any other time, he probably would've welcomed the fun of carrying a cute (and busty!) kunoichi like this, but now, her weight was just another burden for him. Deidara was too tired to care about how mean that comment was; it wasn't like she'd ever know. "...Yeah... Bya-chan, you need to

wake up..." the missing Iwa-nin murmured, stumbling along the path. A stray rabbit probably could've beaten him at this point. He was one of those shinobi who could fight for days on end, but afterward, he *needed* recuperation time. Preferably something longer than a week. Not this nocturnal stagger through the woods to gods-know-where.

He shifted her a bit, ignoring the way her hand was sliding limply down his chest. Deidara snorted and shifted her again, but she just slid the other way. He finally became aware that his exhaustion was acting upon him like alcohol and he had been wavering those past few steps. If he could just find *something* to sleep in...

But then the worst thing possible happened. Even if there had been a major earthquake and it had squished them all it would have been better.

The now-familiar, darkened forms of Hyuuga Neji and Uchiha Sasuke leapt down from a tree, skidding to a halt in front of the slow procession. Kunai drawn and bloodline limits blazing, the two rescue shinobi glared at him for a long moment. Deidara didn't dare move.

"Drop the girl," one of them demanded; in the darkness and his tired state, Deidara didn't even care which spoke. He only warily watched the moonlit glint on the metal of the kunai.

"...No... yeah," he mumbled tiredly in reply. He wasn't going to give up now, but he did *not* want to fight these two. Especially because they were sober this time.

"We won't ask again. Set Hinata-sama down," the other barked harshly. Deidara had to wonder if these two had been following him, looking for the most inopportune time to attack. Narrowing his eyes irritably, he summoned the energy to shake his head, ignoring the hair hanging in his eyes. After the fight he hadn't had time to tie it back up again.

"No... injured. Leave us... alone, yeah..." he growled out, and started to take another step forward. A kunai hit the ground not an inch in front of his toes, successfully stopping him. Deidara's patience was thinning. He was tired, he was hurt, he was sore and drained and just plain agitated. He needed to get himself and the Hyuuga girl to somewhere safe, especially before some other Akatsuki attacked. These two were *not* helping things, and even if it would've been easier just to hand the kunoichi over, he wasn't going to. She was his partner now; they had fought together, and she had been pretty strong before that genjutsu hit her. Plus, the Akatsuki was probably getting pretty annoyed with him, and a bargaining chip never hurt things.

Nonetheless, the explosives expert gently set the limp girl down, setting her in an awkward, almost sitting-like position. He stayed in his half-kneeling, half-sitting position beside her as well, staring sleepily up at the two Konoha pursuers. He wouldn't even get to be killed by ANBU... It would just be these two punk jounin from the Leaf.

"Get away from her," one of them hissed; Deidara assumed it was the other Hyuuga. Neji or whatever his name was. Now that he was down, the blonde knew he wouldn't be able to get back up. He was just too tired.

"No..." he sighed in reply. He could still retaliate verbally.

"*Now*." The kunai shifted, into a throwing position. Deidara decided that he didn't want his Hyuuga princess to get hurt, and turned hurriedly, hugging her as protection. He tensed his body, arms wrapped around his victim-partner, and had his bird land on her shoulder and protect them both with its wings. Apparently the other shinobi thought he was going to kamikaze and have the bird explode with both of them, because the kunai or any other attack never came.

Deidara craned his neck around, watching warily the two silhouettes in the moonlight. They all froze like that, for what seemed like a long while, until finally Neji stepped forward. He grabbed the back of the Iwa-nin's shirt, prying him apart from the cobalt-haired girl. Stubbornly, he clung to her. (If only to annoy him.) "Let go," the jounin demanded coldly, yanking him back a bit more.

"No." Deidara just locked his hands behind her back, pulling her against his chest.

"Let go."

"No. Yeah."

"*Let go before I destroy your chakra system,*" the Hyuuga hissed, and for a moment, the blonde was almost scared of him. But the moment passed, and he only continued to stare impassively up at his Byakugan.

"...No. She's injured, yeah..." He nodded toward the blood covering both of them, shrugging slightly at the same time. Raising his shoulders like that, he felt the tip of the Uchiha's katana against him—so Sasuke wasn't out of this argument yet, either. But honestly, the Iwa-nin didn't know why they didn't kill him and be on their merry way with her. It probably would've solved a lot of things.

(But then again, if he died, that bird would explode. And probably kill her. So it was almost like a hostage situation.)

"Then let us heal her, bastard," Sasuke said boredly, pressing the blade a bit into his shoulder.

"Go ahead..." Deidara closed his eyes, but regretted it instantly. It only intensified his fatigue, so he slowly reopened his eye. And then realized his chance. "Heal Bya-chan, yeah..." he added carefully.

Neji instantly knelt down beside them, making sure to elbow the Iwa-nin aside while trying to get to his fellow clan member. Safely hidden behind her back and partially obscured by her long hair, Deidara began his hand signs.

"Do anything and you'll die," Sasuke said, still as dispassionately as before. He was obviously thinking about something else, which was perfect. Even with that bit of luck, Deidara still didn't know if he could pull this off with a pair of Sharingan and Byakugan eyes watching him...

"...Yeah..." the blonde said slowly, and just as slowly closed his eye. Neither of them appeared to notice his little trick. *Perfect*. It seemed like the Iwa-nin wasn't out of this yet. (But then again, the Uchiha was too preoccupied to care and the Hyuuga was bent on healing the other Hyuuga.)

A *Kawarimi* and a pair of *Henges* he could still do.

And by the time Neji noticed, Deidara was back in action. With the two puffs of smoke revealing his little switch and most of his injuries healed, he pushed the kunoichi out of the way of Sasuke's katana, throwing out his leg to get Neji away from them as well. Switching places with her and masking both of them wasn't exactly easy, but it paid off. Now Deidara was almost completely healed, with about half of his chakra restored. And he had never felt better.

"Now this is what I'm talking about, yeah!" he cheered, grinning maniacally. He hadn't felt this good about a trick like that since Iwa...

"Bastard!" Neji snarled and came at him, but Deidara sidestepped, hands forming the two signs necessary to enlarge his existing bird. Sasuke leapt away from it, thinking it was going to explode,

but the blonde just laughed at him. The clay creature picked her up gently with its beak, and with a flap of its now-massive wings, took to the night skies.

That's when Deidara made the mistake of turning to watch it lift.

He felt the palms hit his back, but Neji was even faster than his cousin. He was at sixteen before the blonde could react, and felt his chakra shutting down. Panicking (he did *not* want that bird to explode now!), he shouted, "D-Don't!" But the jounin ignored him, doubling the number of hits until it got to sixty-four. Only then he kept hitting him, finishing his jutsu with a total of a hundred and twenty eight hits. Deidara's chakra was decimated, and his body felt like lead.

Still, he swung his arm in an arc over his head. The bird, in the seconds before it exploded, followed his hand and threw the unconscious kunoichi from its beak in the same arc. At the cost of a katana nearly severing his arm, Deidara raced past Sasuke, catching her in a tackle as his jutsu exploded. Rolling once, the Iwa-nin kept running, his prize in his arms and their backpacks slung over his shoulder. The explosion must have done *something* to the pursuers, however, as they didn't give chase.

Then, with a brilliant stroke of luck, and just as his legs were about to give out, Deidara spotted a lit house on the horizon with his scope. Tripping once over a low branch and doing an awkward somersault, he eventually made it. He could only hope that a medic-nin lived here, or at least someone who wouldn't turn them in to either Iwa or Konoha ANBU. Unfortunately, he didn't realize that there was a river in between them and the house—he and the Hyuuga girl were both being swept downstream in frigid water before he noticed.

It took a lot of splashing, cursing and more cursing, but eventually, somehow, he got them both to shore. The explosives expert briefly considered rooting around for some good clay, just in case, but he was too tired and hurt to care. The blood from his shoulder was annoyingly sticky, and he was beginning to lose feeling in that arm. (Never a good sign.)

All out of energy, he only rolled over and dragged her up by the back of her soaked jacket farther up onto the shore. He just lay there, panting and exhausted. He didn't even know how he got them that far. But at the same time, a little voice told him to keep going. He couldn't give up now. He'd been in worse situations before. He'd come so far. He couldn't give up now!

Like in a dream, Deidara somehow managed to stand up, but knew instinctively he wouldn't be able to carry her again. Especially now that she was positively soaked. So instead he managed to grab her arm, and hoisted her up to his height, pulling her up and putting her arm around his shoulder. He kept that arm there, his other hand going to her waist, trying to keep them both standing first. He was *so* tired... how could he go any farther? What was he doing now, anyway...?

He dragged them both dazedly toward the house, eyes closed and breath slowing down. He would be sleep-walking soon, and the shinobi knew it. Strength, soldier pills, and determination could only take him so far. Deidara could only hope that his shinobi training could take them the rest of the way.

Surprisingly, he reopened his eye to find himself standing in front of a door, wondering how he got there... The blonde kicked at it weakly, frowning when it wouldn't open. He had no consciousness left; Deidara was running solely on past training now. He drew his leg back, and kicked the door down effortlessly, sending it crashing across the room. Someone inside screamed. The two exhausted ninja stood in the doorway, soaked, bloody, and basically standing while sleeping. "He...lp... yeah..." he breathed finally, and pitched forward. It felt good to finally sleep again.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Neji's pissed that he let Hinata out of his sight again, and fell for such a stupid trick.

Sasuke's pissed because he knew his brother had been there, and he hadn't been able to pick up his trail. So what do you get when you add two agitated geniuses together?

Healing and Inflicting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neji punched the nearest thing—a tree. The bark scraped across his knuckles, but he continued to take his frustrations out on the wood. His fists were bloody and bruised by the time the tree shattered, but the Hyuuga still wanted to punch something. How could he have been so *stupid*? *Kawarimi* and *Henge* were grade school things... and yet he still fell for a simple, amazingly smart trick.

He ignored the burns on his arms and shoulders, ignored the blood dripping onto the grass below. Like a good shinobi, he ignored the pain and the injuries. They were only flesh wounds, anyway. Neji stomped over to another tree, beating it until he actually broke a finger against the massive oak. Swearing as loudly and colorfully as he wanted (for the first time in his life), he kicked the tree, cracking it. Bark bits showered him.

That bastard, how dare he... How dare he trick me like that?! Worse yet, he knows that Hinata-sama is my... The caged bird snarled and leapt at another tree. He didn't even know *what* Hinata was to him anymore.

"Yeah, take your time coming to help me," Sasuke shouted blandly into the darkness. The Hyuuga only glanced over in his direction. It was *his* fault, after all, that he tried to stop the Iwa-nin. Sure, he had gotten a glancing blow in with his katana, but now he was laying, in a rather bad mood, in a puddle of his own blood. Neji chose to ignore him, still fiercely attacking the tree. "Hey! Fate guy! Quit beating up the foliage and help me get up!" the Uchiha persisted in growing anger.

"*Fine.*" The white-eyed shinobi stomped over, taking care to step on some of Sasuke's hair. The Uchiha snarled at him and his Sharingan activated itself. Neji, without any grace or compassion for whatever pain it may cause his 'partner', looked at the katana pinning Sasuke's shoulder to the ground for a moment, then kicked it. The Uchiha grabbed his ankle with his other hand, and with a burst of chakra that Neji barely cared to notice, threw him bodily into the crack oak from before. The force of it completely broke the tree, but Neji didn't seem fazed. He didn't feel anything, except minor annoyance at the splinters in his hair.

"Bastard..." Sasuke hissed, trying to get his sword out of his shoulder. He couldn't; his arm wasn't at the right angle. "Help me... Get this thing out of my shoulder, now! Or you'll think that that last bird was a fireworks display!" he shouted, starting the very recognizable seals for his *Gokakyuu*. Neji briefly considering just leaving him there.

"Hold still," he muttered, striding over and grasping the katana by its hilt. His pale eyes wandered over the blood dripping down the blade; Sasuke had wanted this thing out of him *that* badly? Subtly activating the Byakugan, he noticed that the Uchiha's other hand was practically shredded from trying to grasp it. Neji pulled the weapon deftly out, and, as an afterthought, held out his other, bloody hand to help him up.

Sasuke got up on his own, snatching the katana away from him sourly. He shoved it in its sheath, still miraculously strapped to his back, and set about inspecting his slashed hand. Apparently his right hand was more important than his left shoulder, but Neji supposed that only made sense. Sasuke *was* right-handed, after all. "Look at us. Two elite jounin, reduced to this sorry, bloody mess by a chakra-depleted, moronic Iwa-nin and an unconscious kunoichi," he snapped bitterly, rummaging around in his backpack for some bandages. He threw the roll at Neji, who caught it

boredly, and shrugged off his katana before stripping off his shirt. "Bandage my shoulder. Hurts like hell."

The Hyuuga prodigy was tempted to throw it back momentarily, but his body told him that his back and shoulders needed bandaging as well. Neji sighed, but couldn't help but 'accidentally' poke the katana wound several times as he was dressing it. "You're going to have to help me with my shoulders. Got burned by that damn bird..." he mumbled, holding out his hand for Sasuke's.

"Knew there had to be a reason you actually helped me," the Uchiha replied dryly, wincing slightly as Neji took care to prod the cuts on his hand as well. "I saw that," he hissed, narrowing his Sharingan eyes. Neji just looked innocent.

-.-.-

After Sasuke got his revenge in fixing up the Hyuuga—the two geniuses were at a loss for what to do. Neji was still stewing in his own rage, and Sasuke felt like joining him. Truthfully, he couldn't care less about Hinata and that stupid Iwa-nin at this point. It was his brother he was (still) after. Earlier yesterday, they had come across a large, manmade clearing, and it was quite obvious that it was made in a shinobi fight. Even more obvious were the scorches and craters created by explosions, meaning that they were on the right trail in following them.

But the ground was all mud, puddles everywhere. And there were *four* different pairs of footprints in that mud. One was clearly Hinata's, and another was the Iwa-nin's. The other two were both respectively *huge* and small, almost Hinata's size... It didn't take a genius to add two and two. Only this 'four' turned out to be Itachi and whatever his partner was. The shark man.

The footprints were *fresh*. They couldn't have missed them by more than a few hours.

And that infuriated Sasuke to no end. He had been *so* close to finally catching up to his brother... and then, as if to rub salt in the wound, they actually *do* catch up to the other two. Hinata and—Deidara, was it? The missing-nin. But they had both survived their encounter with Itachi... though admittedly it looked like Neji's cousin had witnessed the cruelty of the *Tsukuyomi*. Even if she wasn't his favorite person in the world, Sasuke still felt sorry for Hinata because of that. That meant that either that Deidara really wasn't a shinobi to sneeze at, or maybe Itachi was losing his edge...

Moreover, it just irritated him. He had been *so close*... yet so far. There was still a chance that he could catch up to his brother... but was he really in a condition to fight him? And even so, what would Neji do? He probably wouldn't appreciate getting ditched, especially after such a humiliating defeat. If it came to a fight... Sasuke really didn't know who would win, anyway.

"You don't really want to rescue Hinata-sama, do you?" Neji asked bluntly. Sasuke gave a slight start, turning to look at him. Curse that Hyuuga perception. But two could play that game.

"You're not after her just because she's your cousin, or even the clan heiress, are you?" he replied smoothly. "This isn't about protecting her just because of that any more. Is it?"

The two stared each other down, and Sasuke vowed that he wouldn't be the first to break it. Plus, he could always cheat and copy Neji with the Sharingan—it would ensure that he wouldn't blink, at least not first, as long as he didn't speed up too fast. But at the same time, he knew he'd have to

be careful. Ever since the Cursed Seal incident, he had been careful with his eyes and his chakra. Wasting precious chakra for a mere staring contest could be disastrous later on. So the Uchiha merely kept his eyes on the Hyuuga, forcing himself with his awesome will not to blink. But the brunette seemed just as determined. The two jounin continued their staring.

But Sasuke had already lost—in his anxious and agitated state he had accidentally put too much chakra into his Sharingan. The result was that he did copy Neji's blink—before the Hyuuga himself blinked. Neji smirked at him, and crossed his arms as he leaned back against a convenient (semi-cracked) tree. Sasuke scowled at him, glaring away into the dark forest. As if he needed prompting, the Hyuuga coughed innocently. Turning his scarlet glare back on him, he decided to come clean. It really couldn't hurt anything at this point. "No, I didn't start this for Hinata. I never really intended to go through with it. True, she *was* part of the Rookie Nine... but that is the end of any emotional attachments to her. I'm just after my brother, as you've guessed."

"You realize that the quickest way to your brother would be through Hinata-sama and the blonde bastard, right?" Neji replied calmly, though he was still smirking smugly. Sasuke narrowed his eyes a bit.

"Yes, but that was... before. You saw that. That was a shinobi fight, and I believe their opponent was Itachi. It'll take too long to trail the Iwa-nin, especially when he's *this* close..." he retorted, running a hand through his black hair. (It *was* getting a bit long, he noted in annoyance.)

"You're in no condition to fight any member of the Akatsuki. Let alone another Uchiha and whomever his partner is. You'd do better to keep following them. They may meet up to fight with your brother again. At any rate, unless the bastard's killed, he'll lead you to the Akatsuki," Neji said logically. He even had the audacity to look rather bored, picking at his nails.

"And what about you? I've seen the way you fight that man... No one's that loyal to a mere clan member," Sasuke hissed spitefully, upper lip curling. He hated the fact that he was probably right, at least about the extent of his injuries. But at the same time, Itachi might be injured as well... It was a risk he was completely willing to take. (The reward outweighed the risk, anyway.)

"Like *you* would know how *loyal* clan members act..." Neji said carelessly, then blinked. It looked like it had honestly slipped out of his mouth, if the expression on his face was any indication. "I didn't mean—"

"At least I'm not committing acts of *incest*," Sasuke snarled, though it was technically a lie. (In Konoha, shinobi and non-shinobi alike were allowed to marry or have children with cousins. Most clans did that, anyway.) But he was rewarded with the reaction he wanted; Neji looked *pissed*. Almost demonic. "You're just a love-struck fool, Hyuuga."

"At least I'm chasing something I can actually *achieve*," the dark brunette spat back, uncurling his hands from their fists—which was actually more dangerous for him, anyway. "My cause is not only much more noble than your pitiful revenge attempt, it's also much more practical, and—and *honestly*, at least it was Hokage-approved at first! You're just trying to chase back your nightmares and keep your past memories at bay."

Sasuke stood up straighter, and took a step toward him. His hands, on the other hand, were definitely balled into fists. "Noble? *Noble*? I'm avenging my clan! You just ignore your father's death, and instead focus on your *Hinata-sama*. Pathetic obsession, it's as bad as Sakura or Ino! *I'm* trying to do some good, kill Itachi and I'm taking down the Akatsuki, too! You couldn't care less about the group! Never mind that it's a group of maniacal murders, as long as you save your precious—" Shinobi instincts kicked in and cut him off. He couldn't win a fight against Neji in their present states, and it wouldn't do him any good to gain another enemy, either. Instead, the

Uchiha turned his glare to the forest, muttering, "Hn."

Neji looked like someone had slapped him (and, as tempting as that sounded, Sasuke instead jammed his fists in his pockets). Slowly, he forced out a smirk, though it appeared as more of a grimace, and answered, "Wise move, Uchiha." Still, neither one would forget the other's words for quite some time. "We'll continue their trail at dawn."

"Hn," Sasuke repeated sullenly. Neither of them would get any sleep; more likely than not, they'd spend the remainder of the night glaring at each other.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Fate smiles upon Deidara and Hinata, but for how long will that last? After all, they're on a strict time limit, with no telling what other obstacles lay in their path... But first, recovering and training!

Wake Up To The Mundane

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara woke up. He didn't open his eyes, or move, or even really breathe. He was just savoring being *alive*. Last night had been *so* tiring and exhausting and just overall horrible... And then he realized that another part of why he wasn't moving was that he couldn't. Shinobi training took back over, and he forced himself to try to move his arms. Nothing. They were unbelievably heavy...

So instead the blonde just sighed minutely and went back to sleep. (Because sleep was nice.)

-.-.-

When he awoke again, Deidara actually managed to crack open his eye. (At least the one minus the hawkeye.) It was dark out... But even more startling was the lack of stars or moon above him. In fact, the lack of *sky*. His eye snapped open, but once again, his body remained immobile. Breathing deeply, the explosives expert calmed himself down, repeating, *It's just a room, it's just the ceiling, I'm just in a building...*

Deidara mutely studied the room. It reeked of non-shinobi-ness. A window out of the corner of his eye, beige walls, and several mundane, sparse decorations scattered about in his vision. So the house he had stumbled upon was not a ninja household... fortune had smiled upon them. With a colossal effort, he managed to sit up, leaning on one elbow. It hurt like hell, but he felt that he could at least stay up long enough to finish his sweep over the room.

But his blue eye widened considerably when he noticed he was *not* alone in the bed. The Iwa-nin completely froze, though slowly reddened, as he recognized the dark hair and sleeping form of the Hyuuga girl. *What is she doing in my bed?!* he thought hastily, cursing (and somewhat thanking) his body for not obeying his order to scoot away from her. Worse yet, he noticed that even though it looked like he had received medical attention (if the bandages were anything to go by), whoever he had found had failed to put his shirt back on. Calm, stoic shinobi or not, Deidara did *not* feel comfortable in the same bed, especially without a shirt, with any kunoichi he knew.

He forced himself to calm down (*it's really not a problem, it's just some runaway emotions, really*, he told himself logically), and continued to exert that force onto his body, willing himself to sit up, then slide to the edge of the bed, and finally stand up. His feet were bare, annoyingly enough; even in houses, he *hated* walking around with bare feet. Deidara swayed slightly on the spot as his muscles locked up. But it was only two steps away—his backpack. And within that was soldier pills.

It seemed like an agonizing eternity, forcing himself to take those two steps, but afterward he dropped graciously to the cold, wooden floor, digging through his pack for the wondrous pills. (At the same time, he had to swear to himself that it really wasn't an addiction.) The sore ninja popped two of them in his mouth, swallowing immediately. And not a moment later, his body finally relaxed, and he felt the relief of his chakra slowly coming back to him. Deidara sighed in relief, leaning back against the bed, sliding down until he was laying on the floor.

But then the door opened, light spilling in from the hallway. Alarmed, the blonde jumped to his feet, though he only managed to trip over his backpack's strap and fall sideways back onto the bed. But to his credit, the kunai that thudded into the door handle inches from his unexpected visitor's hand made her flinch and utter a little scream. *A woman?* he thought as he hurriedly sat up on the bed, sticking his best unaffected shinobi expression on his face.

"Ah, I'm sorry, did I startle you, Shinobi-san?" The girl didn't look much older than himself (if she even was), and though her voice was even enough, she had the doorknob in a death grip and her face was whiter than the walls surrounding him. Deidara regarded her for a moment, then casually stood up, and pretended to dust himself off.

"It's Deidara, yeah," he whispered after a few moments. "Not 'Shinobi-san'." This girl was no kunoichi, that much was definite. Plus she looked too... *soft* to be a ninja of any village. The brunette was wearing a sort of nightgown, and her long hair was mussed from sleep; it was obvious she had just woken up.

"Oh, right." She bowed deeply, her hair falling in a graceful sheet across her shoulders. Deidara watched her for a moment, wondering if she was one of those females who spent so much energy on her looks... "I am Usuki. I'm sorry; I just heard a thump and thought either you or your wife had fallen out of bed, so I came in to check on you. Is everything well...?" As she rose, he couldn't help but notice that her face looked a bit red. Why, he had no idea, but he was too busy thinking, *So THAT'S why they put us in the same bed!* to care much about that. But before he could deny the charges, Usuki continued hastily, "But I see that you two are fine. So I'll be going. Uh—bye—Deidara-san." She turned and shut the door before he could say anything in reply to that as well.

"...Odd... yeah..." the confused blonde muttered into the darkness.

The next morning, his 'wife' still hadn't woken up when Usuki again came into their room (this time with a small knock first) to call them down for breakfast. Deidara glanced at the kunoichi over the edge of the bed (he had resumed sleeping on the floor) and decided she needed sleep more than food. His brunette hostess led him downstairs and introduced him to her parents (he assumed): a man named Hiroshi, and his wife, Hana. He couldn't help think it was a bit odd that they didn't offer any surname, but it wasn't his place to judge.

"Will your wife be joining us for breakfast, Deidara-san?" Usuki asked politely, but her voice seemed oddly wry. But, as Deidara was currently shoveling as much food as he could possibly manage into his mouth, he was yet again unable to answer. (But it wasn't his fault; he couldn't remember the last time he had an actual meal like this!)

"I don't mean to be rude, Deidara-san... but when was the last time you ate? You eat like a starving dog, and you're so skinny..." her mother (*Hana, was it?* Deidara thought abstractly, glancing at the woman out of the corner of his eye) asked worriedly, watching him with an amused sort of fascination. Contrary to her daughter, she wore her dark hair up in a tight bun, not a single hair out of place. As if sensing this, Hana turned to the girl, shooing her out of the room with a snappy, "Usuki! Go, comb your hair and put it up. Our guest will think we're some kind of wild people, with the way you dress and act!" (She left the room, but not without a sulky, "Yes, mother.") Deidara watched, bemused, and wondered if his own mother had ever been so able to read his mind.

The blonde shinobi had been able to get this far without talking, which was probably a good thing. From what he gathered of these non-shinobi's customs, he and his Hyuuga partner would have to work out a suitable story and make a few changes. Apparently having long hair let loose was a bad thing... he couldn't help but subconsciously start twirling a lock of his own long hair around a free

finger.

"Gods, boy, is that a *mouth* on your hand?!" Oh, shit. Apparently Hiroshi *could* talk, but he had picked the wrong conversation starter. Nearly choking on his breakfast, Deidara tried to clear his throat well enough to explain before either he started jumping to conclusions or Hana started going into hysterics. (It happened all too often.)

"Oh, shush, Hiroshi. He is our *guest* and a shinobi!" She jerked her husband over and hissed something into his ear, but the explosives expert didn't catch it. And judging from the expression on Hiroshi's face, he didn't think he wanted to hear what she said, either. "I'm so sorry, Deidara-san, my husband is a bit *blunt* sometimes. Do forgive us." Still silent, Deidara watched warily as she bowed, then yanked the man down in a bow as well.

Finally, he swallowed, saying, "It's fine, yeah. Don't worry about it..." So hair could not be worn down, and guests were apparently very honored. Hana seemed to rule the household as well, not her husband. Interesting customs. Still, these people were unfortunately not ninja, so recovery could take awhile. This was a difficult situation if not handled properly... "Thank you for the meal, but I'll excuse myself now. I've eaten enough of your food, and I would like to check on my, ah, *wife*." Deidara bowed a bit, barely suppressing a grin. This was going to be a fun month after all.

-.-.-

Hinata awoke slowly, blinking her ashen eyes open. After a moment, and a soft, sleepy sigh, she bolted up into a sitting position. Not only was that horrible nightmare world still in her head, but —*A-Am I in a bed...?* She looked down, surprised. It felt nice to be sitting in a bed again, though she had to be careful. *Am... I back in Konoha?*

But unfortunately, going from the relaxed postures in sleep to a tense ninja in only a few moments locked her muscles up, and she was temporarily frozen there while trying to calm herself down. But even worse was that after she managed to move again, she *hurt*. Her body still felt stiff, and one leg and her side hurt more sharply. *Ah, yes... where the shark-man attacked me with that sword*, she remembered grimly, but, looking down at herself, the dark-haired kunoichi realized that she was bandaged. *If I have received medical attention, why do I still hurt...? Not Konoha...*

Hinata slowly scooted over to the edge of the bed, and found she could stand (if leaning on her good leg) without too much difficulty. She also found herself making the bed out of habit. But then the heiress could not decide what else to do. She was alone in the foreign room, injured and confused. *Deidara-kun isn't here, either... I wonder where he is...*

The doorknob turned, and like a startled deer, Hinata jumped and froze. A short, plump woman entered briskly, closing the door behind her without even glancing in her direction. As she turned, however, she gave a start, and, pressing a hand to her chest, exclaimed, "Goodness, child, you gave me a scare. So you're awake, then?"

Hinata nodded dumbly, but couldn't help but think that it was a rather pointless question. The woman walked over, and bent over to inspect her face. Intimidated by the stranger and her sudden proximity, the dark-haired kunoichi couldn't help blushing and shrinking back a bit. "U-Um..."

"Your eyes..." the woman murmured, studying her intently. The Hyuuga turned a bit wary, regarding her with a more careful eye now. She could very well be an undercover kunoichi, and her

eyes were always a giveaway... "They're very pretty." Or, she could just be overreacting. Accidentally, Hinata couldn't help but let loose a relieved sigh. But at least she immediately caught herself, glancing toward the woman for her reaction. But the dark-haired stranger just put a comforting arm around her shoulder, casually, and chirped, "Yes, I know, you poor thing. With such exotic looking eyes you must get a lot of insults..."

"U-Um... yes..." She didn't trust herself to say anything further. This woman still could turn out to be her enemy, and she was wounded and had no idea where her partner was...

"Well, miss, I'm Hana, and I'm very glad that you and Deidara-san managed to find this house the other night. Those injuries you two had, tsk-tsk." The woman introduced herself formally, but smiled at the last part. Hinata felt that she would grow to like her. "I had just come up to change your bandages, dear, but I'm glad to see you're awake. Afterward you can come down and have a late lunch with us, alright?"

"Ah, th-thank you..." Hinata quickly bowed her head, turning red. She sensed no lie from the woman. But even so, she squeaked and blushed even harder when Hana stood up and ordered her to take off her pants.

"Your leg needs the most attention, it had a nasty gash in it. I think there's no infection, though..." Her temporary medic briskly poked and prodded at the injury. She then took a roll of bandages out of her skirt's pocket, deftly rewrapping it with a skilled hand. Hinata, even though pants-less and redder than a tomato, could appreciate such skill. "Oh, these clothes will need washed as well... Would that kimono you have be alright to wear for today? I know it would be a bit dressy, dear, but your clothes are just *awful*... I'm sure Usuki—oh, that's my daughter, she looks to be about your age—could lend you some clothes, but your breasts are just so much larger than hers... Oh, hah, you poor dear. I'm sorry, did I embarrass you?" The cobalt-haired girl thought she might faint from mortification. She was used to Kiba and Ino making the occasional comment, but not from this woman she had just met, and so casually!

Hinata let herself be taken care of like a scarlet-faced rag doll, even letting Hana take off her shirt to inspect the bandages around her middle. (The shinobi in her, however, didn't like how the blood was soaking through—she shouldn't be bleeding that much.) She was fine with being attended to like this—it was almost reminiscent of the Hyuuga household. In fact, wearing a kimono all day for no reason and all this blunt attention would be just like it...

Until Deidara, talking animatedly with a brunette girl, walked into the room. He stopped dead, slowly flushed, and then turned on his heel to leave, but Hana's voice stopped him, "Oh, Deidara-san, I was just finishing up changing these bandages on your wife. She's healing remarkably fine, so there's no need to worry! I'll be out in a moment, and I'll leave you two alone for a bit. Usuki, out, we need to go check on the horses!"

With a final nod, the woman and her daughter (*Usuki? That's a nice name*, Hinata thought dazedly) marched out of the room, leaving an inadequately-clad Hyuuga and awkward-looking Iwa-nin alone. "A-Ah, Bya-chan, you're—uh—awake. Yeah," Deidara finally said, resolutely staring at the wall with his back to her. He pointed stiffly to his pack, laying by the other side of the bed. "Soldier pills are in my backpack. Your kimono should be in yours..."

"...Ye-Yes..." Hinata finally snapped to her senses, and dove for her own bag. She thought she had never gotten dressed so quickly before in her life. "H-Hana-san was ch-changing th-the bandages..." she stated awkwardly, trying to break the incredibly uncomfortable silence.

"Oh, yeah, I heard that... yeah..." He seized upon the subject eagerly. "So, uh, how are you healing up?" She had taken one of the chakra-enhancing pills, but her body was still very stiff. Stiff

enough not to travel, and she still felt exhausted, mentally, from that horrible genjutsu... She frowned, and self-consciously picked at the sleeve of the lavender fabric. "W-Well, Bya-chan... We need to be shinobi here. We're going to have to fit in while you recuperate, yeah." All business now, Deidara sat on the edge of the bed and crossed his arms matter-of-factly. "This family is very kind, and they're ignorant of shinobi customs, rules, and skills. We can't afford to enlighten them on much of that. We're also going to have to try to fit in a bit with them, too, yeah..."

"H-How long a-are we staying...?" she asked hesitantly, staring down at her fingers. She had somehow adopted the old habit of pushing her fingers together again...

The dark-haired Konoha-nin felt his gaze. "Hmm... We still need to make it to the Rain... We have roughly twenty-seven or twenty-six days left. But without some proper healing, this could get ugly, yeah." Hinata looked up to find him grinning, as if he was *happy* that this was (going to be) so difficult. "I think two days would be the most we could spare. And then we're going to have to book it, Bya-chan. That alright, yeah? Or... we could leave now, try to replenish our chakra enough to heal ourselves or hope that we come across a friendly medic-nin."

In truth, the Hyuuga girl would've preferred to stay at that house with the friendly non-shinobi. But it was probably more practical to take the alternate route if Deidara actually wished to meet his goal. As a ninja, then, it was her duty to lie and take the smarter choice, of course. But looking at him, Hinata had to realize that he was genuinely asking her for *her* opinion on the matter. ...*That's a pleasant change*, she thought abstractly. She still had to get used to his personality... and the fact that he *wasn't* a Konoha shinobi, and thus didn't know how worthless a kunoichi she really was.

So she should keep up appearances and take the logical choice. But even as she was formulating the lie in her head, he chirped, "You have a funny look on your face, yeah. What're you thinking about? Wanna stay here, Bya-chan?"

Hinata frowned, but couldn't help nodding slightly. "Y-Yes... I th-think it w-would be w-wise to stay here..." she stammered quietly.

"Wise? Not really. It's pretty stupid to stay in one spot for that long, yeah," he stated dryly, grinning at the look of embarrassment that instantly covered her face. "But it'd be nice to take a break... and I'd like to get some more clay, too, yeah. Plus, it's no fun unless there's some pressure, Bya-chan!"

Hinata found herself questioning his sanity. If he had looked the problem through like that, then why take the unpractical choice? Unless Deidara really *would* like to give himself more difficulties in his quest. Was he testing himself?

"So it's settled then!" he continued, ignorant of her curious, if not shocked, expression. "We'll stay here for a couple of days, yeah. Hana-chan and Hiroshi-chan wouldn't mind, but we're going to have to conform to a few of their rules, and we'll need to come up with a cover story, eh, Bya-chan?"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara and Hinata figure out a vague, acceptable cover story. Deidara teaches Hinata how to infuse clay with chakra, while secretly practicing some of his other jutsu. But what's this? It seems Usuki has a bit of a crush on him... How will Hinata react?

Fairytale Leaf Comes Back to Haunt Them

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"They think we're married, but you've already heard that part. And most people wouldn't think of this, but we have to decide if we're newlyweds, yeah. It could impact a lot of behaviors they will expect of us."

Hinata found that she could play the role of a wife quite well. But she had found that out before this, during a particularly embarrassing mission—a whole clan in Kiri still thought her name was Aburame Hinata. It was pretending to be a newlywed that was difficult. As a recently married couple, they were still very much in love, and had to take most opportunities to flirt and act very couple-y. The Hyuuga girl didn't quite feel comfortable with this—if not because Deidara was her *partner* (and kidnapper, protector, friend, and now apparently husband), then because she still thought of Naruto. But that genjutsu had twisted her perspective of him, and reduced any admiration and emotions to the hyperactive ninja to a very confused mess. Playacting with Deidara wasn't helping that mess.

"Long hair must be tied up, evidently, so you're going to have to wear your hair up, Bya-chan."

That part was much easier. She had taken to (quite recently) tying back her long hair in a low ponytail (not unlike Neji's), so it was much easier to shift to a higher hairdo. In fact, it was quite fun for her—Hinata loved her hair, and back in Konoha all of her friends used to help her put it up in different ways at parties or just for fun. The kunoichi put her hair in twin buns, not unlike Tenten's usual hairstyle, smiling slightly. She missed the weapons mistress, as well as all of her other friends back in the Leaf... But Deidara shocked her out of her memories by asking (in a curiously awed voice) how she put it up like that. She spent the next half hour teaching him how to.

"Oh, and don't tell them your last name, either, yeah. I haven't gotten any surnames from them, and anyway, 'Hyuuga' may just complicate things. But I haven't mentioned your name, so go by whatever you want."

This concerned her a bit. Deidara didn't know her true name (or if he did, he just continued to call her 'Bya-chan'), but if she introduced herself as 'Hinata', it could come back to haunt her later. But then she was still getting used to being called 'Bya', so she may not react if they called her by that name, and that would only bring concern or questions. It would be best to wait a bit to mull it over.

"Hana-chan seems very much like a mother, so as long as you're careful around her, that should be fine. Hiroshi-chan shouldn't say much to you, either, yeah. Usuki-san seems pretty curious about shinobi life and techniques, though, so be very careful what you say to her. She knows that I'm from Iwa and you're a Konoha kunoichi, but don't give her any reason to question our different villages, yeah?"

That was even easier than the hair. Usuki, though a kind girl, didn't seem to want to talk to her much. She much preferred talking to Deidara, and was almost acting *clingy*. In fact, it was almost like Usuki *didn't* like Hinata, with a few of the looks she gave her, but it didn't needlessly concern the Hyuuga. She was much more intent on fulfilling her kunoichi training and not screwing this up. (But Hinata wasn't sure if she could go another day and a half pretending to be Deidara's wife; unfortunately, he was *very* good at his role.)

Deidara excused himself and his newfound wife from the house, explaining, "I am an artist, yeah, and sadly I must go gather some clay! And of course my lovely little Bya-chan is learning from me, the sweetheart. You can all come if you'd like to see how I do this, yeah." Of course, to a normal, non-ninja family, the offer was too good to resist. He had been counting on that. Sure, he didn't *like* being watched while he gathered clay or forced his chakra into it, but at least the Hyuuga wouldn't be nearly as uncomfortable with more people around. The blonde smiled slightly, almost feeling sorry for her and her shy personality. (*Am I going soft?* his conscience demanded.)

He steered the pale-eyed kunoichi toward the river with a firm hand around her waist, grinning stiffly. Usuki was walking *very* close on his other side, smiling pleasantly as she started a conversation. "So, Deidara-san... you are an artist shinobi? And your art is your clay?"

"Sort of... I prefer what the clay *becomes*, yeah. You'll see," he replied cheerfully. He had a feeling that none of the other three had ever seen a living clay bird before. Unfortunately, the explosives expert probably couldn't make it explode. He couldn't afford to waste clay like that, and it might give their hosts the wrong impression.

"C-Could... Could you teach me how to work with the clay?" Usuki asked shyly, blushing a bit. She turned away when he turned to look at her, though, which only confused him.

Still, he shook his head, chuckling. "No, I really couldn't. You'd have to learn how to mold your chakra, if you have any, and then infusing it into the clay is sort of difficult, yeah... That's why I didn't offer in the first place. Bya-chan is the only one who'd stand a shot of learning, and I'm not even sure she could do it, no matter how skilled she is." Deidara couldn't help but laugh as the kunoichi squeaked and ducked her head. (He missed the glare Usuki shot her.)

"So, Deidara-san... How do you put your chakra or whatever it is into the clay? And then what does it do?" Hiroshi asked conversationally. The Iwa-nin turned around, and, walking backwards, grinned and held up his hand. The mouth on the palm grinned as well, sticking its tongue out. The man raised an eyebrow.

"With these, yeah! But you'll see when we get to the ri—ah!" Unfortunately, walking backwards led to clumsiness. Deidara tripped, but two pairs of hands caught his arms and hauled him back to his feet. The Hyuuga and Usuki both let go of him hurriedly, though, and seemed to have a contest to see who could turn redder faster. "Thanks, you two." He beamed, and, learning his lesson, turned back around.

As they neared the river, Deidara couldn't help but feel as if someone was watching him. He glanced around carefully, making sure to keep his walking pace constant and his body outwardly relaxed. (Inwardly, he was wound tighter than a spring.) But then the blue-eyed blonde noticed that the Hyuuga's Byakugan was active—that would explain his feeling, though he had no idea why she had it on. Just as a precaution? Or had there been someone else watching...?

After a few minutes, nothing happened, so he gave it up. With a yelp and a leap, however, he came upon the river's muddy banks and *dove* into the shallow water. He rolled around in the mud happily, whereas the others watched him with looks of either shock, revulsion, or barely restrained laughter. Deidara wiggled around in the mud a few more moments before looking up at them, grinning sheepishly. "I like mud and clay, yeah."

Usuki and his wife seemed to accept that as an answer, but instead, Hana and Hiroshi turned to the Hyuuga for a better explanation. She reddened a bit, visibly looking for a suitable answer. "He, ah, De-Deidara-kun enjoys pl-playing with th-the clay to, ah, ch-check the consistency o-of the clay..." She obviously had no idea if that was true or not, but the two seemed to accept that, at least. Truth was, Deidara just *liked* playing with it.

A few minutes later, a mud-covered explosives expert was cheerfully teaching his art to a muddy Hyuuga, a non-kunoichi, and two bemused spectators who were watching from the clean safety of the grass. The brunette was having a bit of difficulty creating a bird, whereas the kunoichi was waiting patiently beside him with another semi-lopsided dove. (Deidara couldn't help but appreciate how easy it was for him because of his mouths.) But finally, both girls got their birds and awaited the next set of instructions.

"Oh, yeah, it probably would've been easier to try the chakra *before* we molded the clay..." he said thoughtfully, cocking his head. Usuki sighed, but giggled nervously afterward. "But everything's clearer in hindsight! We'll just have to work with this, yeah." But of course, Deidara had *no* idea how to infuse his chakra into the clay without the aide of his mouths. He just sat there, staring at the birds, feeling a strange mixture of embarrassment and confusion.

But his Hyuuga wife decided to take the initiative and gently picked up her dove, Byakugan still active. The brunette shot her an odd glance, probably noticing the enlarged veins for the first time. The kunoichi ignored her, and stared at the clay for a long while, then lifted her palm. It was glowing faintly with chakra. She pressed it to the bird's chest, and focused on that point.

Nothing happened in response.

The Hyuuga sighed in defeat, but a moment later, it was a toss up between who was more surprised—her or Usuki—when the bird flapped its wings experimentally, fluttering up into the air. Both girls gasped and watched it, positively delighted. Deidara couldn't help but grin at the Hyuuga's genuine smile. Feeling Hana's gaze on his back, the blonde leaned over and placed a (rather muddy) kiss on his wife's cheek, beaming as he said, "Good job, Bya-chan! Yeah!" He also couldn't help but feel a bit of pride that she didn't faint; the undercover kunoichi only blushed heavily and smiled shyly at him.

This time, though, Deidara noticed the dark glance Usuki gave her. Unfortunately, he had no idea what that meant. And he didn't have time to ponder, either, as this time he was *sure* that he felt eyes on him. (Not to mention the sudden flare of chakra both from the Hyuuga and behind them.)

--.-

Once upon a time, there was a princess. Or, at least, she was always treated like a princess. People respected her out of custom, not personally. She had servants, maids, even technically her own guardian. Her father held her up to strict, rather demanding, guidelines, and was almost always disappointed that she didn't meet those standards. She was a princess, daughter of the king and heir to the throne.

But she was not a happy princess.

She was tired of always disappointing people. Primarily her friends and family, the people she held dear. She tried to change herself, and succeeded, but only minimally. She even fell short of her own

standards and goals. But the princess kept trying, primarily for one sole reason.

To impress her white knight.

He was a kind, determined, strong, caring person who changed himself and even others. He tamed evil beasts, converted enemies, slayed dragons, and saved lives. He was a hero. To the village, to his friends, and especially to the princess. She was desperately trying to catch his eye by making herself stronger, more worthy of his attention and friendship. But still, the white knight, the object of her affections, hardly paid attention to her.

And to make matters worse, just as she was fated again to meet up with her beloved knight, the princess was kidnapped. By an evil, horrible, powerful dragon. She was spirited away to unknown parts for reasons unknown. A beloved friend of hers died by the dragon's hands. She despised her kidnapper, hoping desperately that her rescuer knights would hurry.

And imagine the princess's joy at seeing that *her* white knight was among the retrieval team! Yes, her other knights were just as caring and wonderful, but they paled in comparison. He was the *white* knight, the *light* knight. The other three were rather dark in contrast to him. He attacked the dragon fiercely, but unfortunately, was temporarily vanquished by the dragon's strength. The princess was once again kidnapped and taken away.

The dragon was trying to trick her with a façade of kindness, but she wouldn't fall for it. She didn't care about the evil beast; she was just waiting for her knight to come back to save her. And she didn't have to wait long—soon there was another fight. But... the white knight wasn't there...

Her faith in him cracked, but she remained devoted, for the most of it. Yet again, the dragon came out on top, and she was carried further and further away from her home. The dragon was once again being kind to her, protecting her, being friendly toward her. She couldn't help but warm up a fraction toward him. The princess fought to remain cold and hateful to him, but it just wasn't in her nature, even to evil dragons.

Life almost fell into a sort of a routine for the kidnapped princess. She would usually have to cook for them (unless she wanted soldier pills), though it wasn't unpleasant for her; she liked cooking. They would spend the rest of the day traveling, heading for the dragon's goal—a far off, foreign country and even more villains. (Strangely, this didn't seem to scare the princess at all.) Once every few days, the two non-white knights—whom she still loved for pursuing her relentlessly, regardless of the non-white-knight-ness!—would catch up and they would have to fight. The princess tried to stay neutral on the subject, much too confused to decide which side to take.

But then the monotony was broken. They had another fight... and the princess was forced to defend the evil dragon who had kidnapped her. She was forced to fight alongside him... as his partner.

It was an exhilarating, if nightmarish, experience. She was thrilled and excited to finally have some purpose in this whole thing, other than that of the victim, though she found out later that she couldn't sleep properly because of that horrific mental torture-genjutsu.

And even now, it felt like she had been thrown headfirst into a blender. In order to preserve what little cover they had stumbled onto, the princess and the dragon not only had to get along and not fight, but they had to pretend to be *together*. With no knights in sight to save her from the embarrassing situation.

But still, the lonely little princess couldn't help but feel a bit... happy. After all, she liked nice attention, regardless of who it was from. But then another person came along to spoil her

happiness...

A girl. A regular, rather attractive girl, no princess but certainly no peasant. And she was in love with the evil dragon. If it had happened a week earlier, the princess would've been more than happy to give her kidnapper over to the girl. But now... she was feeling a bit *protective*? Or maybe jealous...? It was odd, and more than a bit embarrassing.

But then, all in the blink of an eye, the petty rivalry became insignificant. Because the princess spotted another actor to enter her fairytale. She and her dragon were instantly united on the battlefield again, even if weary and a bit sore from the last fight. The silver-haired man looked vaguely familiar, like a faint memory itching at the back of her mind. But the princess still had to wonder—was this man another knight or another dragon?

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Who is this mysterious person, and does he have any allies or enemies they'll have to worry about? And now what's happened to Neji and Sasuke?

The Great Escape Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara instantly didn't trust the guy.

Even though he was obviously a shinobi (even without the headband, though its emblem was conveniently hidden behind his bangs for the moment), and he approached them easily and embarrassedly (he had fallen out of a tree a second before, successfully giving away his location), and even though he had a friendly, gentle smile and a kind face, Deidara didn't trust him. He knew looks could be deceiving, and it didn't take a jounin to learn to mask his emotions and expressions.

The sudden enemy walked slowly toward them, one arm hanging limply—but conveniently near his shuriken pouch—by his side, and the other had worked its way up to sheepishly rub the back of his head. That messed up his already untidy silver hair, apparently tied back in a ponytail at the base of his skull. Several mussed spikes of gray were showing over his shoulders as he ran his gloved hand through his hair. His eyes were closed and he was still smiling, stopping a few paces from where he fell out of the tree. Plenty of room between them for a fight, should it come to that. (Deidara was secretly hoping that it was.)

"Ah, hehe, I'm sorry. I guess I surprised you two a bit? Though it looks like Hyuuga-sama there noticed me long before..." The shinobi dropped his hand, opening his eyes for the first time. They were coal black and flashed a bit. (Not to mention the fact that the blonde could've sworn that his nice-guy smile was a bit of a smirk as he called her 'Hyuuga-sama'.) He reached up with his other hand to push up his glasses, and the explosives expert was *sure* that the guy was actually flipping him the bird as he did it.

The kunoichi's white eyes widened perceptibly as he called her by her surname. Involuntarily, she reached up to stroke one lock of her hair, watching him warily while visibly racking her memory for such a man. On a whim, and against his better judgment of waiting for her to place him, Deidara spoke. "Who the hell—*heck* are you, yeah? What business do you have with Bya-chan?"

"Bya-chan'...?" Their visitor raised an eyebrow delicately, keeping a carefully curious look on his face. "I take it you mean Hyuuga-sama? Hyuuga Hinata-sama?" He pointed bluntly at the dark-haired girl. She reddened, but only slightly, still trying to think of the past.

"Yeah. So what's your business with her?" Deidara knew her real name was Hinata—he had known for some time. But Bya-chan sounded much cuter, and he had gotten attached to that name. The man finally tilted his head up a bit, and his short, framing bangs fell out of the way of his hitai-ate. It was an Oto headband.

He had a dozen kunai and shuriken in him before he could open his mouth to reply.

But unfortunately, Deidara had expected a *Bunshin* or *Kawarimi*. Instead the shinobi was apparently still there, and a medic. Running one hand skillfully down his body to heal himself as he wrenched the weapons out, the silver-haired enemy threw back every one back at Deidara with a slightly frightening speed. He cart wheeled out of the way, and at the same time, shouted to Usuki and her parents, "Get out of here! Yeah!"

The Hyuuga girl was now in a fighting stance, thinking pose forgotten. The blonde, from his position behind and to the right of her, noticed that she had stuffed the live, clay dove she had

created before into her sash in the small of her back. Clever, but it wouldn't hold long, and there was no telling how stable the chakra in it was in the first place.

But luckily, the enemy chose the *wrong* place to fight. The explosives expert couldn't help but grin at all of the clay below him, begging to be used. Not to mention all of the brand-spanking-new clay he had already infused with his chakra. (He had even tried infusing more than usual into it, calling his new clay C2.)

"I killed Orochimaru! I can kill you, too, yeah!" Deidara shouted bluntly, almost wishing to avoid a conflict, no matter how tempting all of his art's medium there was laying under his feet. The medic-nin, a kunai in his mouth and a handful of shuriken poised to throw, paused. It was now his turn to ponder on some unknown subject. The Iwa missing-nin took the opportunity to create two more birds, enlarging them with a seal and bringing his number to about three and a half. (The half being the Hyuuga's deformed dove.)

Finally the dark-eyed ninja spat out the knives in his mouth, regarding Deidara with none of the previous friendliness. "You...? You're the one who killed Orochimaru-sama..." Deidara nodded, absently licking a chunk of mud off of his cheek. He knew that if this shinobi was an Oto-nin, he *definitely* already knew about the Sannin's demise. So why repeat himself...?

He was about to defend himself (*and Bya-chan and Usuki-san and Hana-chan and Hiroshi-chan, yeah*, his mind added) from the mysterious ninja, when the Konoha-nin in front of him finally spoke. "Do... D-Do I know you...?" she whispered, almost in confusion. It was apparent that the two had *some* sort of history together, though what the Hyuuga was doing with one of Orochimaru's lackeys Deidara couldn't even imagine. Not that he really wanted to.

"Ah, I'm sorry that my character has faded from your memory so quickly, Hyuuga-sama." The silver-haired man faked a sigh, hanging his head. "Even after I healed you from that nasty wound your cousin gave you, saved your life?"

Deidara snorted loudly, thankful that his captive still didn't seem to recognize him. But one more snappy 'Hyuuga-sama' out of him and the blonde vowed to personally ram a kunai through his eye socket. He already didn't like all of this talking-why not fight, capture (or kill) him, and sort the whole mess out later? Sooner or later the Oto-nin was bound to discover that they were protecting the non-shinobi, and no doubt he'd use that to his advantage.

"Still don't recognize me? Here, maybe this will help... *Henge no jutsu!*" In a puff of nin-smoke, the silver-haired man disappeared. As it cleared, an ANBU stood in his place, wearing a black cloak and some type of mammal mask.

Deidara didn't wait for anything else. If this was an ANBU pursuer, he needed to take care of this as quickly as possible. He pointed at the masked shinobi, and three clay birds pelted toward him at a breakneck speed. The blonde himself also rushed him, pulling out a handful of shuriken and a kunai.

But then something even stranger happened.

Nevermind the fact that somehow the dark-haired girl got to him before him (Deidara *was* rather proud of his speed, though), but it was even more shocking that she managed to jump into the air, use her *Juuken* to disarm two of the birds at once, and then use an elegant kick upside-down to get the other clay creature away. She landed lightly back on her feet, Byakugan staring him down, between the blonde and the ANBU. "St-Stop or I-I'll attack!" she warned in an abnormally high voice, facing *Deidara* with the *Juuken* stance. He halted instantly, blue eye wide.

Has she finally turned on me? he thought, almost sorrowfully. But the ninja side of his brain took over, evaluating the playing field. *No doubt I can take the Hyuuga, though the ANBU may give me a bit of trouble. But I still have my birds—they've just been disarmed—*That train of thought was cut off as the two disarmed ones detonated over their heads. Against his will, Deidara had to look up, watching the explosions. "How... How did you figure out how to detonate them, yeah?!" He had *not* known she knew how to do that. That could really come back to haunt him, especially now.

"My, my, isn't this interesting," the cloaked ninja behind her said dryly, a smile hidden behind the mask. Deidara threw a shuriken at him for good measure, hitting him squarely on the snout with a hollow-sounding *thunk*.

-.-.-

Strangely, it *hurt* Hinata to face Deidara like this, once again in a fighting stance. She thought they had come so far... But she needed some questions answered first, especially if the man behind her turned out to be who she thought he was. With one rather pleading look at her partner, she turned and faced the ANBU fake.

"...I-I... I heard th-that Kakashi-sensei k-killed you..." the heiress said softly, looking up into the eyeholes of the mask rather hopefully. She had finally located the silver-haired Oto-nin in her memories, though many of them weren't pleasant. Still, he had healed her, and as far as she knew, he had also helped Naruto-kun a great deal during that first chuunin exam.

"He did," he replied scornfully, voice muffled slightly. Hinata frowned slightly. "Orochimaru-sama can raise the dead," he added softly, almost regretfully.

"Orochimaru is dead. A-Are you... mad...?" (Strangely, her stutter was disappearing. Between Deidara and the wanna-be ANBU, they seemed to calm her...) Hinata didn't want this to come to a fight. She may have been biased, but if this was who she thought... she still believed him good. Everyone has reasons.

"...No. I am not. I just wanted to... see who did it." His voice was nonchalant. As if this were a stable situation.

"D-Deidara-kun did... Why are you here...?"

"I was... I cannot turn to Konohagakure after this. The captives held in Orochimaru's prisons have all escaped and overthrown the guards. I've made many enemies; I have no place to turn to. And I was curious as to who was the one who finally defeated Orochimaru-sama..." he explained in a monotone. Hinata couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him, even if he betrayed Konoha. (She also couldn't help but not feel much loyalty to the village any more...)

"So... you came to us...?" Hinata asked softly, weighing the pros and cons of this situation. A medic-especially one as skilled as he-would be invaluable. He also had healed her once before, so obviously he wasn't just out to kill her. And he definitely didn't seem to want revenge for Orochimaru.

"Let's just decapitate him and get on with this, yeah," Deidara called sourly, and she felt him suddenly right behind her. He set his chin on her shoulder, glaring boredly up at the ANBU mask.

"Come on, Bya-chan, who is this?" His lazy posture was ruined by the kunai pressing against her shoulder blade and the remaining clay bird hovering right over their heads.

The Hyuuga stood on her tiptoes and gently reached up to take the mask off. Even with a *Henge*, he kept the rest of him normal, minus the sudden shift in persona. She was certain of it now. The face of Yakushi Kabuto stared back at her. "His name... Th-This is Kabuto. He-He healed me once, after Neji-niisan h-hurt me in the chuunin exams..." (She flinched slightly as the image of her cousin in the genjutsu came back to her.) "He's... he's alright, Deidara-kun..."

"I don't *like* ANBU," the blonde said instead, scowling.

"I merely like to disguise myself when undercover." The silver-haired shinobi smiled pleasantly. "Hyuuga-sama and I had a brief history on one of my extended missions."

Hinata saw, only with her Byakugan, Deidara raise an eyebrow. "What kind of 'history', yeah...?"

"We were both in the chuunin exams. A-And he healed me. And he helped N-Naruto-kun..." she said slowly, wondering just how much of what she knew of Kabuto (which wasn't very much, she had to admit) she should tell Deidara. He already didn't seem to like him much. "Th-That's all..."

"I was only serving Orochimaru-sama because of a debt owed, nothing more. In fact, I feel... grateful that you killed him, Deidara-san." The medic-nin bowed, but it only caused Deidara's expression to grow darker. "I would be honored if you allowed me to accompany you, and, ah," Kabuto smiled a bit at their bandaged states, "Be the medic on your team."

"That's bull, yeah. Do you expect us to believe that?" the blonde snapped, jerking his head off of Hinata's shoulder. She couldn't help but feel that Kabuto would be a valuable asset regardless, and if worst came to worst there was no doubt in her mind that a two-against-one fight would turn out in their favor. What was the worst that could happen? (*And, an annoying little part of her mind stated, Kabuto-kun isn't technically an enemy. Don't you want to be with another Konoha-nin? He was raised in Konoha, after all...*)

"I-I think we sh-should give him a chance, Deidara-kun..." she said softly, but instead of the surprised expression or outburst she expected, the Iwa-nin draped an arm across her shoulder, leaning his chin on her again. In his hand he held a kunai, sharp, gleaming and pointing at Kabuto's heart. "D-Deidara-kun!"

"I don't like you, yeah. The only reason you're still alive is because Bya-chan has vouched for you. But the second I sense something wrong, you're dead. Got it, yeah?" he stated in the closest thing to a snarl she had ever heard him use. She could understand his suspicion, but there was no need to say it like *that*.

"That's acceptable," Kabuto replied easily, unfazed. "Care to fill me in on your current situation, then, teammates?"

"Never one to skip an opportunity, are you?" the Iwa-nin muttered, and Hinata almost felt the need to shush him. (*He's being rather rude, the snobby Hyuuga side of her thought.*)

-.-.-

After most of the commotion had gotten sorted out, Deidara was fuming as he found out that he

would have to act like this newcomer—Kabuto—was the Hyuuga's personal doctor and their mutual friend. Hana seemingly accepted this with the explanation of "It's a shinobi thing," to explain the almost-fight. Hiroshi was a bit more suspicious, though didn't say anything to any of them about it.

Usuki, on the other hand, looked positively *devious*.

She continued flirting (for Deidara had finally figured out that that was what she was actually doing) with the explosives expert, and now that he was aware of her motives, he also noticed that she was trying to get his partner alone with Kabuto as much as possible.

He didn't like it.

Deidara probably would've told her off for it, had her mother not beat him to it. As the group (plus one) retreated back toward the house (for a lunch the soldier-pill-addict was looking forward to), Usuki had tried to hold his hand. Hana noticed this, unfortunately, and yanked her daughter almost *violently* away from him, hissing venomously, "Deidara-san is *married*, Usuki! You shouldn't act like that to him! You're shaming yourself by acting like a *hussy*!" The blonde had tried innocently not to look guilty at the scolding and the sulking girl, and instead hurried his wife and her doctor into the house.

The brunette girl didn't try or say anything else, though the glares she shot the kunoichi *and* her mother were murderous. She seemed indifferent to Kabuto, on the whole. (*Lucky bastard*, Deidara thought sullenly, trying to ignore Usuki's stare as he ate.)

Kabuto stopped him in the hallway when he finally managed to escape. Already cross because of her, he only snapped, "What?!" and jerked his arm away from his sudden ally.

"We may want to leave. Tomorrow." The silver-haired man looked a bit annoyed at Deidara's temper, but kept his own under control. "Hana-san and Hiroshi-san are starting to get worried about Usuki-san's infatuation with you. I overheard them talking earlier... You may want to tell them we'll be leaving soon. It could head off a great deal of trouble."

Deidara snorted, leaning against the wall. He crossed his arms over his chest and set his face in a glare aimed at the Oto-nin. "I wasn't aware you had been elected commander of this little mission. Last time I checked this was *my* mission anyway. You aren't making any decisions here, yeah." The blonde couldn't resist a smirk as he added, "Though if you'd like to challenge me to a fight to decide the commander of this little squad, be my guest, yeah. That'd be fun."

Kabuto pushed up his glasses again, in that annoying way that made Deidara question his finger placement. "Regardless of your suspicion, you were only staying here to recuperate. You have your medic now, so the logical decision would be to move on anyway. I thought you had a time limit on this mysterious mission—that I still believe you should tell me about, too. If I'm part of this *team*, I have a right to that information."

"Because I'm going to give a known *spy* that kind of information, yeah." He rolled his eye, and stood up again. Deidara pushed past Kabuto (taking care to give him a bit of a shove), stomping toward the guest room. He paused in the doorway, however, and looked over his shoulder at the medic. "...We'll leave tomorrow at dawn."

Hinata couldn't wrap her mind around the day. (And it wasn't even over yet.) First she had finally figured out the clay jutsu thing, even without the—*Um, with the Byakugan*, she corrected herself mentally. The dark-haired girl still didn't really like referring to the bizarre mouths on Deidara's hands. True, it was the second clay bird she had made, but this one she had created all on her own. The dove was currently perched on her head, cooing silently and rustling every now and then. She had no idea how long it would last, or if it would explode suddenly, but she was willing to take the risk. It was cute. *And I made it all by myself... Even Deidara-kun didn't know how to do it without his... um... mouths...* She closed her pale eyes, frowning a bit. She just wouldn't be able to get past that.

And just *right* after she had succeeded—feeling happy and almost carefree—Deidara had to ruin her mood by kissing her. True, it was on the cheek, and it was mostly for show and to keep up appearances, but it had caught her off guard and sent her plummeting into the deep abyss of total mortification. Sure, *technically* he had kissed her before, with those *other* mouths (*Why can't I stop thinking about them?*), and it wasn't as if she hadn't ever been kissed before. She had, but just never as casually and as suddenly as that—*No, I have been kissed that suddenly*, her memories informed her. *Back in that one mission to Kirigakure when Shino-kun and I were supposed to be married. He had kissed me then, too...*

Even reminiscing that little bit caused the heiress to completely go back to another time; her life in Konoha, part of Team 8. Her teammates were her first real friends, the first ones who had even acknowledged her presence. True, she had had her share of embarrassment and accidents with them, but usually Kiba had been able to laugh it off for all of them. Hinata missed them all terribly, remembering numbly that there wasn't even a complete Team 8 back on Konoha... because of her. Kurenai-sensei and Akamaru had both been killed... by Deidara. *How could I have been so friendly toward him...? Oh, no, h-have I betrayed my friends AND Konoha...?* The stray thought left her in a mild panic.

Clashing memories confused her. Kiba tickling her to try to make her laugh. Helping Deidara put his hair up like Tenten's. Going shopping with Sakura, Ino, Tenten, Lee and Neji (the boys had been dragged along to compliment the girls on how they looked, Ino had told her gleefully). The first chuunin exam, watching as Kabuto showed them all his ninja cards. Kurenai-sensei taking them all out to eat for their first successful B-rank mission. Deidara grinning and telling her the story of her life in fairytale form. How could such a happy-go-lucky man be such a killer? And worse yet, she was *enjoying* being his partner, enjoying helping him!

I-I can't believe I had tricked myself into playing along with him... I couldn't spy on the Akatsuki if I tried... I'd be killed as well. I should have tried to turn back to the Leaf... I shouldn't have run away from Neji-niisan and Sasuke... Maybe I should just leave now. The last sentence she had thought almost accidentally, like some sort of bubble slipping up from the surface of a still pond. But once she had thought of it, it wouldn't leave her alone. Deidara trusted her enough that it would be as simple as packing her things and walking out the door if she wanted to leave. Kabuto... that was even more confusing. He couldn't do much to stop her, either, though the kunoichi *still* didn't know where his loyalties really lie. Defending him had been on a whim.

She was trusted enough that she could escape and it would be hours before anyone found out. Hinata stiffly walked up to their shared room, packing up the few things she had unpacked in the short time she had been there. It took only a few minutes. She had made the bed and cleaned the room a bit, mostly out of habit, though also oddly out of guilt.

Halfway down the stairs, she was plagued by another round of guilt and doubt. Why *should* she

leave Deidara? Surely the Leaf thought her dead or gone forever, and there would be only a handful of people that that would impact even slightly. Deidara had helped her, had befriended her, and had taught her new jutsus and fighting styles. Plus, he reminded her of Naruto, in a roundabout sort of way.

But he had kidnapped her. Surely she wanted to go back to her home, with her cousin and her remaining teammates and friends? Why would she want to help a missing-nin? After a long pause, Hinata continued down the steps toward the front door. She had watched the Iwa-nin with her Byakugan more than once as he enlarged his art. She should be able to copy it and at least use her bird to fly some of the way.

Hinata closed the door silently behind her, unaware of the eyes that watched her.

Outside in the cool twilight, she set her dove gently on the ground. Engaging her bloodline limit, she studied it for a moment, then made the seal that Deidara usually used. But instead of growing, the bird exploded. Surprised, she jumped backward, accidentally tripping and landing on her behind as she stared at the small circle of blackened grass that had been her pride and joy.

"N-No... I won't give up now..." she mumbled mechanically, and dusted herself off. She knew how to make more birds; it was only a matter of trial and error. Unless someone heard that explosion, the Konoha-nin still had plenty of time before anyone noticed her absence. (Or so she thought.)

The Hyuuga heir was squatting in the mud, painstakingly trying to force more chakra into a semi-formed bird (she couldn't even honestly call it a dove this time; it looked more like a hybrid of a hawk and a duck) when she noticed someone come up behind her with her Byakugan.

Usuki knelt down beside her, wordlessly staring at the muddy creation in the navy-haired girl's hands. Hinata didn't say anything either, instead pushing the final bits of chakra into it and making the seals necessary to bring the thing to artificial life. "...What are you doing?" the brunette finally asked, standing up and offering her hand to help the heiress up.

"I-I'm making another bird. My dove e-exploded earlier..." she replied softly, looking regretfully down into the eyeholes of the bird in her hand.

"I see..." Usuki replied quietly, watching intently as Hinata sent the bird to flutter a few yards away, landing on the grass. Hoping fervently that this one wouldn't detonate, she formed the signs, watching the chakra circulation warily. To her relief, it disappeared in a puff of nin-smoke and reappeared several times bigger, nearly as tall as herself. The hawk-duck cocked its head and looked at the two girls with its hollow eyes. "You're leaving? Without Deidara-san or your, ah, 'doctor'?"

Hinata heard the skepticism in her voice and turned to look at her sharply.

"...I'm not stupid," the non-kunoichi said in a low voice, narrowing her eyes slightly. "You and Deidara-san act nothing like newlyweds; you're much too modest for that. And don't think that I believed that whole 'oh-he's-my-doctor' charade you put on with the silver-haired guy, either."

The Hyuuga found out that she had severely underestimated her, mostly based on the age-old belief that non-shinobi were never as bright as their ninja counterparts.

"And now you're leaving?" It was a question, not a statement. For some reason, that made it harder to answer. Hinata stayed silent, white eyes fixated on the enlarged bird. She felt no pride at the accomplishment now, even though her way out of this confusing mess was staring her in the face.

Her bag was on her back, and she had the means. All she had to do was take two steps forward and one step up; the Hyuuga didn't even need to answer Usuki.

"You know, Deidara-san really *is* handsome. I like him—a lot. But mostly... I was trying to gauge your reaction. You three must be on some sort of team instead, aren't you?" The brunette girl laughed a bit, and Hinata could see her smirk with her all-seeing eyes behind her. "And now you're leaving. Ninja never cease to amaze me. I had always thought that they put teamwork and camaraderie before all else and were all rules, rules, rules."

She still couldn't bring herself to say anything. What the girl said was true, but this situation was hardly like the normal ones where those rules applied. She had been *kidnapped*, for gods' sake! A missing-nin and a traitorous medic were hardly ideal teammates. But then why did Usuki's words make her feel guilty? Was it just her ninja upbringing coming back to haunt her? Or was she truly, honestly guilty about leaving Deidara (and Kabuto)?

"I... I'm s-sorry," (*It sounded like 'so sorry' with my stutter*, she realize ruefully) she said slowly, her voice threatening to break. Already she had tears in her eyes, but it would do no good to let them loose now. Shinobi didn't cry. (*Shinobi don't follow around their kidnappers and defend traitors, either*, her conscience informed her in a business-like manner.)

Hinata grabbed the bird's side and hauled herself up onto its back, sitting between its neck and wings. It wobbled slightly as it experimentally flapped its wings, and she almost worried that it wouldn't support her. But finally she lifted off of the ground, albeit a bit unevenly, and hovered above Usuki. The brunette was looking up at her with a mixture of disgust and disdain. "You're betraying Deidara-san," she called up to her after a moment.

Hinata just bit her lip and looked away, toward the forest.

-.-.-

Neji really couldn't believe this. He *really* couldn't believe this. Aside from the fact that he and Sasuke had managed not to speak the whole time since their fight, the fact that they hadn't been able to pick up the trail of a half-dead shinobi and an unconscious kunoichi, and the fact that it looked as if they had been going in circles this whole time, but this really took the cake. The Caged Bird stood his ground, watching the man's chakra circulate through his body as he stared calmly at them.

"Hey, do you two know where I can find this guy...? He's about this tall," the stranger held up his hand, a few inches taller than his own, "He has blue eyes, only one's always covered by his hair... He has blonde hair, too, and he was wearing an Iwa jounin vest...? Oh, and he had these really weird mouth-things on his hands. He uses some sort of explosions, so he's a ninja...?"

Of course, the Hyuuga prodigy knew that he was describing Deidara perfectly.

But the question was, why was this newcomer searching for him?

The man was obviously a shinobi, though there were no headbands in sight. He seemed to be about Sasuke's or his own height, though his lanky build made him look taller. He grinned at them expectantly, as if he actually believed they'd answer. Neji glanced at Sasuke with his Byakugan; the Uchiha was staring, mouth agape, as their sudden visitor took what appeared to be a water

bottle with a straw off of his belt and take a loud *slurp*.

"We've seen no such man," Neji responded, eye twitching slightly as he took another long drag on his drink.

Apparently satisfied, he replaced the bottle, smacking his lips. He then grinned again, though this time it was smug. He narrowed his purple eyes and surveyed them both, as if debating over something. It was quite obvious that he knew that they knew something, possibly that they both had seen the Iwa-nin. "...Well then... Thanks for your time. I hope we don't meet again," he said pleasantly, and vanished from view.

"How does he know about Deidara?" Sasuke asked quietly, glancing around with his Sharingan for any signs of movement.

"He may be from Iwagakure," Neji hissed in answer, searching the nearby trees for him. No sign anywhere. The guy was actually stupid enough to leave, unless he had managed to devise a way to trick the Byakugan. Just to be sure, he took a half-step to his right, allowing him vision of his previous blind spot. Still no one there.

"No... he wasn't from Iwa. Did he look like an Iwa-nin?" The Uchiha glanced upward, as if in thought. Neji just shrugged. "I would guess he would have been a Kiri-nin, based on his appearance..."

"That only confuses the issue. Why would a shinobi from the Mist be looking for him? ...Could he possibly know about Hinata-sama?" Neji paled slightly at the thought. The Byakugan *was* valuable, but up until now, he hadn't believed that she was kidnapped purely for her bloodline limit. But now he couldn't get the thought out of his head.

"It could be unrelated. What if he was a teammate who got separated...?" Sasuke grunted, but it was obvious he didn't believe it either. The Hyuuga didn't reply, and instead pushed on through the darkening forest in his pursuit. Whatever happened, he *needed* to make it to his cousin before that freak did.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Kabuto and Deidara leave the safety of the house to continue the race to the Rain-but what about Hinata? And surely there's more behind Kabuto's sudden appearance than he stated? But then, what about this other newcomer...? Why is he searching out Deidara?

The Great Escape Part II

Deidara walked into the bedroom, expecting it to be empty. Instead, he almost tripped on the hunched-over form of his kunoichi partner. While he was recovering his balance, she jumped in either surprise or fright, accidentally kicking his foot with her own. He fell on top of her, while she squeaked and turned red, white, teary eyes wide. As Deidara himself was rapidly approaching a shade of red to rival her face, what made matters worse was that Kabuto had been following the blonde into the room. He fell over them, adding his own body to the already blushing and confusion mass of limbs.

"Um, D-Deidara-kun... couldyoupleasegetoffofme?" the Hyuuga squealed, closing her tear-filled eyes. Deidara had to wonder why she was crying. He didn't have long to wonder, however, as Kabuto's foot collided with the back of his head. The Iwa-nin didn't even get the liberty of shouting at him. Mostly because his lips were suddenly locked with his partner's.

Her eyes snapped open again, staring into his for a brief moment as she flushed. Then, her face rapidly heating up again, she hastily formed a few seals and swapped places with a pillow in her *Kawarimi*. Deidara gasped as his head hit the floor, the metal plate on his hitai-ate making an odd-sounding clang.

After he and Kabuto got the hell away from each other, all three were left with the rather embarrassing task of breaking the silence. The silver-haired medic broke it by quietly stating that he would sleep on the floor to allow the kunoichi the luxury of the bed. She latched onto the subject almost thankfully, shaking her head and protesting, "N-No, you two c-can have it, I-I'm fine with sl-sleeping on the floor..."

Deidara and Kabuto exchanged a flat look.

Still, even as the night wore on, the sun long set, the Hyuuga would not be persuaded to take the bed. This only frustrated Deidara, to the point of playing tug-of-war with her pillow with her. (Aside from the fact that it would be rude not to give the lady the bed, and the fact that he did *not* want to share it with the Oto-nin, he didn't want to spend the whole night glaring at Kabuto, kunai drawn, across the pillows.) "Do you two always act like this?" Kabuto asked politely, watching the struggle from his spot on the corner of the bed.

"No, this is our first fight, yeah." He glared at the innocent-looking ninja, as if it was his fault. (Which, in his mind, it was.) Unfortunately, Deidara's body chose that time to yawn loudly. The kunoichi pounced upon it eagerly.

"S-See? You're tired!" she exclaimed, letting go of the pillow. He windmilled his arms as he tried to catch his balance, half-heartedly glaring back at her. "Y-You both need to go to bed; you're tired. And, um, a-aren't we leaving *early* tomorrow...?"

"Yes, I thought we agreed to leave at dawn," Kabuto chirped pleasantly. Deidara shot him a traitorous glare. The medic just smiled at him, and added, "I haven't given either of you the checkups you need, but I can tell from looking at you that you both need much more sleep. I don't think we need to have this argument. If Hinata-sama is that dead-set on giving us the bed, let her. The most polite route would be to let the lady have her way at this time."

"It-It's just Hinata..." she said softly, ducking her head as she awkwardly pressed her fingers together. The explosives expert knew when he was defeated in an argument. It didn't mean he was happy about the arrangement, however, especially since Kabuto was the one to defuse it.

"As you wish, Hinata-chan," the medic-nin replied, in the same cheerful voice that Deidara found so irritating.

They're certainly friendly together, yeah, he couldn't help but think. But then, who am I to say anything? It's not like Bya-chan and I have anything aside from this twisted partnership. I don't even know if she wanted to be my partner. Dejected, he mumbled something about going out for a breath of air to the other two and excused himself from their presence.

-.-.-

It had to be at least midnight.

Hinata had been tossing and turning for hours, even though her sleeping back was quite comfortable and warm. It was just that she couldn't get to sleep. Well, no, that wasn't quite it, either. It was more as if she didn't *want* to be able to sleep. Every time she dozed off images of her red-eyed cousin against a blood-red sky came back to haunt her. She couldn't sleep with such nightmarish things.

Carefully, she rolled over again, staring at the bed. Both Deidara and Kabuto seemed to be asleep. The Hyuuga silently slipped out of her sleeping back, tiptoeing to the door. The hallway was pitch black as she continued down the stairs for a glass of water. But what had started as a drink run evolved into something more when the kunoichi noticed that there was a strip of light coming out from under Usuki's door. Debating with herself only momentarily, she changed courses and made her way to the other girl's room.

Knocking softly, she whispered, "Usuki? A-Are you awake...?" The door was instantly opened, revealing a wide-awake brunette. The sudden light made Hinata blink, though she quickly recovered.

"Hinata-san?" What are you doing awake...?" her hostess asked carefully with a guarded expression. Her long hair was down, and for the first time Hinata noticed just how long it was. It almost reached her waist.

"I-I can't sleep..." she said quietly as an excuse. Usuki paused for a long moment. Then, finally, she stepped aside and granted her access to her room. (Her bedroom was just as sparse as the guest room.)

The non-kunoichi shut the door behind her, and sat on the edge of her bed. It was still made, indicating that she hadn't even tried to go to sleep yet. "I was cleaning," she said casually as an explanation. "...Now what are you really down here for?"

"I r-really couldn't sleep... I keep having some ba-bad nightmares..." Hinata protested weakly. Usuki's stare told her that she wasn't convinced. "I... I wanted to know why you stopped me... earlier..." The heiress hung her head, letting her own unbound hair hide her face.

"Because I know an emotional girl when I see one, ninja or not. And emotional girls tend to make mistakes they'll regret." The Hyuuga cheated and activated her Byakugan to look through the sheet of her hair to see her expression. It was very nonchalant. "And... I couldn't let you do that to Deidara-san..."

"Wh-Why not? He's a shinobi, he could have handled it...!" Hinata jerked her head back up, her

own face pleading. She didn't want to be wrong about that; she *did* want to go back to Konoha, didn't she...?

"He doesn't like the silver-haired man much. But he really likes you." Usuki smiled sadly. "Plus, from what I know of shinobi, they operate in three-man teams, don't they? I thought you two were waiting for the other one to catch up, weren't you...? Why ditch that team now?" The brunette apparently caught onto a topic she could talk about, because her speech was faster and much more curious rather than accusing.

Still, the captive kunoichi didn't know what to say to that. The whole thing was rather unorthodox and impulsive. *But... why can't it be as simple as Usuki-san says...?* Hinata couldn't help but think. *I-I could just make this work and move on with my life...* Her conscience even told her that she was happier like this. Without the glares of her father, without embarrassing herself in front of the other shinobi, living a freer and more spontaneous life... *But what about Neji-niisan?*

"You're still regretting something...?" Usuki asked gently. Hinata decided that she could grow to like a girl like her; it was a shame that they had both gotten off on the wrong foot. "Come on, tomorrow you guys will leave and I'll never see you again. And who would I tell?"

"I, um..." Once again, the Hyuuga found herself without a proper response. Her psyche was begging her to let loose some of this emotional confusion. And though it probably wasn't great kunoichi conduct, Hinata told her.

Told her about her life before, about Naruto, about her old team, about being kidnapped in the first place, about Neji, about the rest of her family, about her strange partnership with Deidara, her memories of Kabuto... about everything. Usuki just sat across from her, cross-legged, taking everything in with a curious look in her eyes. "So... Naruto... This guy is the guy you like? He sorta sounds a lot like Deidara-san..." She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"N-No! I'm serious, this isn't a hypothetical person!" Hinata shook her head hastily, holding up her hands. "B-But ever since that genjutsu... I-I'm not sure what to think..."

"Genjutsu. Is that what you're having those nightmares about?" Usuki asked blankly, all skepticism gone. "That's like... an illusion, right? So can't you just tell yourself that?"

"It's a *very* realistic illusion." The navy-haired kunoichi frowned. "A-And it was v-very frightening... I felt like I was in there f-for *days*..." The brunette girl nodded sympathetically. It was clear that she still really didn't grasp the concept of genjutsu, but surely she understood pain like that and the confusion it caused her.

"So then... You're having nightmares about it. I can see why. So you said that your crush, your cousin and his partner were torturing you?" Hinata nodded. "Ooh... but couldn't you sleep last night?" She cocked her head in puzzlement.

"I-I could..." She knew where this was going; she had asked herself the same question and had come up with only one conclusion. "But I-I w-was sleeping w-with Dei-Deidara-kun..." She ducked her head again, feeling her face heat up. With her bloodline limit still engaged she saw Usuki's knowing smirk. "I-It's just like a-a big brother thing...!"

"I'm sure it is." Usuki remained smirking, though. "Though... Then why were you leaving? Did you want to find your cousin that badly?"

A small part of her wanted to say yes. Then Hinata had to wonder *why* that small part of her wanted to. "I-I suppose... I *do* m-miss Neji-niisan..." *He always protects me, too, makes me feel safe and*

comfortable, she thought dreamily. Unfortunately, she must've smiled or something, because the chocolate-haired one instantly got that smirk on her face again.

"Jeez, Hinata-san... You *like* him!" she stated smugly.

"I-I do not!" she argued hastily, blushing madly.

"Fine, fine. I'm not here to play matchmaker, anyway. I suppose I'm your therapist instead..." She smiled in a gentler way, placing her hand on her shoulder. "But about that man... Kabuto... Do you think he's trustworthy? Those sound like rather vague situations."

"Th-They were... But still... He helped me once. I figure I-I'd help him once, but then if-if he betrays us now... We'll just ki-kill him," she said slowly, regretfully. A part of her actually liked Kabuto. He was polite and friendly toward her. Plus it was practically *unholy* to kill a medic.

"...That's how you shinobi operate?" Usuki asked skeptically. True, it was initially hard to wrap your mind around, but after that, it was essentially true. It was a ninja-eat-ninja world out there, kill or be killed. Tools to be used, tools for murder. That's how it was, has been, and always will be. Hinata glanced away, Byakugan making the gesture null. If someone betrayed you, you killed them. If someone said the wrong thing, you killed them. If someone killed your teammate, you killed them (*but what about Deidara-kun?*). If someone killed you... they would be killed. That's how ninja operate. They killed.

"Yes."

"Well... that's really too bad. I hope Kabuto-san doesn't do anything, then. You three look like you would make a good team." The words startled her, shocked her back into looking into Usuki's eyes. A pyromaniac shinobi destined to join the greatest crime organization the world has ever known, the shiest and weakest Hyuuga created in decades, and the most emotionally confusing medic she had ever seen, together? As a team? As a *good* team? ...Was it even possible...?

"W-We do?" she asked in astonishment, open-mouthed.

"Yes. You and Deidara-san seem to get along well enough, and from what I've seen of Kabuto-san he's pretty nice as well. Hmm, my prediction for the future is that...Kabuto-san and you will grow to love each other as siblings, loyal and protective to the point of death. Deidara-san and he will finally get over their dislike of each other! And, hmm, you and Deidara-san will fall madly in love and-"

"No!" Hinata shook her head, feeling her cheeks heat up, but her mouth betraying her with a small smile. *Sure, it would be nice, but I couldn't betray Naruto-kun or Neji-niisan or anyone else like that! But...* Her mind flopped uselessly; she had already betrayed them, Naruto had become the thing of her nightmares, and her cousin? She wasn't quite sure to think of him any more... "I-I... I don't think it would work out like th-that..."

"Alright, alright. A girl could dream, can't she?" The brunette put up her hands in mock defeat, laughing outright in a pleasant, joking way. "I'm sorry, but I do think you'll get that adorable little brother-sister relationship going on. *If* you don't fall madly in love with him. He *is* cute..." She sighed dreamily.

Hinata ruined the moment—and the wonderful, honest conversation they had had thus far—by yawning. She politely and hastily covered her mouth with her hand, though Usuki shot her a curiously motherly look. "You're still tired? Ah, I'm sorry, Hinata-san! You guys are leaving tomorrow...*as a team*—" the implication was clear "—and you're going to need *some* sleep, aren't

you? You could sleep down here with me if you'd like," she offered in addition.

"Bu-But I can't sleep... I've already tried..." She hung her head sheepishly, her blue-black hair falling elegantly over her shoulders to hide her face. Hinata brushed it aside, looking up innocently from the darkness her hair created.

"Don't you sleep with your hair tied back? I thought you would—the way you had it tied up at first..." The non-kunoichi took her own chocolate locks in her hand, demonstrating by securing it with her hands near the tips (*like Neji-niisan*). True, Hinata had taken to tying it back like that—but only awake. It had been an ingrown Hyuuga tradition to sleep with her hair unbound, a habit that she couldn't get rid of.

"No, I only tie it like that during the, ah, day." She smiled almost apologetically.

"Well it looks pretty on you. Keep it tied like that, for me, alright?" The request surprised Hinata, but she was even more amazed when Usuki turned around and rummaged in the drawer of her nightstand, coming back with a beautiful silk ribbon in her hand. "You can use this."

"Oh, n-no, I couldn't t-take that!" Still, she stared in wonder at the beautiful indigo ribbon. So many people gave her gifts that were lavender—they all said that it matched her eyes. Yes, they were pretty, but she actually preferred this sudden, rather contrasting deep purplish-blue to that pale color any day.

"No, I have plenty. Plus it would match your hair a lot better than mine." She chuckled in self-depreciation, running her other hand through her hair. "Consider it a gift. For not leaving Deidara-san."

Hinata blushed in shame at her earlier actions. "N-No, *I* should be thanking *you* for that... I-I should be giving you gifts as thanks...!"

The brunette actually appeared to consider that option. "Actually... Tomorrow could you do me a favor? Nothing big, just something as a memento before you leave?"

"U-Um, sure...? What is it?"

"Name your firstborn after me."

"U-Usuki!" Hinata blushed deeply, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth.

"I'm kidding... I'll tell you tomorrow." Usuki winked at her, grinning gleefully. "Though it will be painless, so don't worry. Just try to go get some sleep!" (For Hinata had just stifled another yawn.)

Deidara had been lying awake for the past few hours, glaring across the bed at Kabuto. The Otōnin was only making it worse for himself by glaring back. Both shinobi had kunai drawn under their pillows, waiting for some reason to start a fight. Both had been completely still and silent since their kunoichi teammate had left several hours earlier, not bothering to check on her. (*She probably went to sleep on the couch or something. Got tired of our glaring contest, the drowsy blonde surmised.*)

Neither ninja moved in the least when the door reopened, the obviously female silhouette outlined in the faint moonlight giving away who it was. She seemed to hesitate for what seemed like forever (Deidara just continued glowering at the silver-haired medic), then finally, shockingly, she sat on the edge of the bed. In unison, both shinobi sat up, looking down at her in startled surprise. "... Bya-chan?" Deidara added sleepily, cocking his head.

The Hyuuga girl jumped back to her feet, evidently not expecting either of them to be awake. She was also obviously very flustered about something.

"Is something wrong, Hinata-chan?" Kabuto asked quietly.

"A-Ah! N-No! N-Nothing's wr-wrong!" she stuttered hastily, taking a step away from the bed.

"Are you feeling ill?" the medic-nin inquired politely, mildly concerned. She shook her head, and both guys noticed that her hair was tied back in a low ponytail.

"Can't you sleep, yeah?" Deidara asked, with a bit more compassion in his voice than Kabuto. His glaring opponent paused to give him another dark look, then they both returned to worrying over their mutual acquaintance. Again, she shook her head, albeit a bit more hesitantly this time.

"C-Can I... Can I, ah, sleep without two since I can't sleep and I am tired and I think I'll have nightmares otherwise?" She said the entire thing in one breath, and judging on the way her voice rose as she continued, it was obvious it was a great feat for her to even ask that. Even if it was hardly understandable.

"...Nightmares?" Kabuto blinked, and slowly tilted his head to one side. "You have nightmares?"

"Y-Yes..." she whispered, her soft voice barely audible.

"...Is this recent?"

"...Yes..."

"I believe we have the need to discuss this. Tomorrow," he said, pleasant voice restored.

"You can sleep with us, yeah, Bya-chan! Kabuto and I weren't sleeping, anyway. I promise I'll stop him from doing anything perverted!" Deidara crowed happily. Kabuto shot him another glare, but he ignored it.

"Regardless of Deidara's stupid comments, it's true. Neither of us would dare try anything," the Oto-nin added carefully. Regardless of their assurances, the kunoichi seemed anything but. She nervously sat on the foot of the bed again, pressing her index fingers together.

"I-I'll just sleep... do-down here..." She curled up into the tiniest possible ball, using Deidara's leg as a pillow. The blonde, on the other hand, wouldn't let her shyness get the best of her. As far as he saw it, it was just another opportunity to cuddle and be warm. He slept in a cocoon anyway, so he loved sleeping warm. Another body would only heat up the bed, and plus, she was soft. The Iwa-nin grabbed her by the upper arm, hauling her up to lay in between he and Kabuto.

She squeaked loudly, drawing her knees up to her chest, stiffening. Deidara turned and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his head on her shoulder. (He also took the opportunity to try to stab Kabuto a few times with his kunai on the other side of the girl, though to no avail.) Mostly the move was to try to get at the medic, whom he *still* distrusted and disliked and wanted to injure mortally, and hugging his partner was just a pleasant side effect. But when she slowly, hesitantly and carefully wrapped her arms back around him, the blonde was surprised.

The arm he was using as a pillow played with a bit of his hair, twirling it around a finger. The three were all so sleepy that they probably didn't even think about their actions. He felt her shift away from him a bit, and a grunt of surprise from Kabuto. "G-Good night..." she whispered dreamily, in a happy voice. Deidara smiled into her nightshirt. He then made a similar noise of astonishment as he felt her lips on the top of his head—a good-night kiss. (*How long has it been since I got one of those?* the Iwa-nin thought.)

"Goodnight *mom*, yeah," he mumbled in reply, chuckling a bit. Kabuto suppressed a laugh as well.

"Goodnight, Hinata-chan," the medic added with a yawn.

What a team we make, was the last of Deidara's conscious thoughts as he finally drifted off to sleep, somewhere around four in the morning.

-.-.-

The three shinobi weren't looking very well-rested or alert, especially considering they were supposed to be traveling today. Deidara had already had two soldier pills and was popping another into his mouth, trying to cover the action with a yawn as both Hana and Kabuto glared down at him for it. "That is hardly healthy. When was the last time you actually *ate* a decent meal?" the medic asked, his normally friendly voice dangerously low. His dark eyes glinted evilly as he advanced on Deidara, who dodged the question and his lunge with a haughty, "Bya-chan is acting like the mother already, I don't have room for two, yeah!"

Hinata, on the other hand, was the most composed (aside from possibly Hiroshi) one there. True, she was standing in a slouch and she had dark lines under her eyes, but at least she wasn't playing a twisted game of jutsu-tag or looking like she was about to burst out crying. (Deidara had just attempted a *Shunshin* to escape, but unfortunately, Kabuto had grabbed the end of his ponytail. And he was now dragging the Iwa-nin back by a fistful of his blonde hair.)

"I'm going to miss you—all three of you." Hana sniffed deeply, smiling warmly at them. The Hyuuga smiled back at her, though both of the male ninja looked rather uncomfortable at the very un-shinobi-like emotional display. The shorter woman hugged each of them in turn, though embracing the kunoichi longer than either of the other two. "You take care, alright?"

"Yes ma'am," she replied, trying hard not to tear up herself. Even if they had only known each other a few days, Hinata never was good with goodbyes. They were always just so *sad*. Hiroshi just offered a gruff 'bye' and a handshake, but that only made her smile. He was just as uncomfortable with the whole thing as the other two.

"I would like to thank you for the room and the time spent here," Kabuto said formally, bowing slightly. He readjusted his glasses and took a step back, apparently done with his farewells.

Usuki still hadn't spoken. She had just stood awkwardly by the door, hands behind her back, and staring at her feet. Her long hair was tied up in a bun again. (Hinata's was tied back in her cousin's usual style, held with the indigo ribbon she had received.) Finally, the brunette stepped forward, and looked up at the heiress with tear-filled eyes. She shook her head gently, signifying that she couldn't speak without breaking down. Hinata nodded in understanding. "Y-You wanted that favor...?" she asked softly, tilting her head.

Usuki nodded, and shyly took a camera out from behind her back.

-.-.-

Deidara left with some actual food in him, a new teammate, and some much-needed clay.

Kabuto left with two new teammates, one of them shy and motherly, the other spontaneous and prone to causing explosions. Both of them quite unhealthy.

Hinata and Usuki both received the same gift. A photo album, copied with jutsu and already partially filled with pictures. Usuki was left with memories of her handsome blonde, her newfound friend and the mysterious medic. Hinata began a collection of pictures with her new teammates. Usuki was also left with a kiss on the cheek from Deidara. Hinata left on a giant clay bird of her own creation.

None of the trio were supposed to leave with someone following them.

A Kabuto Chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kabuto sighed. Not only was he rather unsure of flying this quickly on a *clay* bird, but already this wasn't working out. True, Hinata had vouched for him, but Deidara didn't even bother to conceal his dislike and distrust. In fact, he was currently glaring daggers at him from his position behind her on the bird's head, while Kabuto was trying to ignore him and continue with her physical check-up. (Actually, he was pretty curious about those nightmares she had mentioned.)

"...You are very undernourished. What have you been eating lately?" Unfortunately, his question was answered as he spied Deidara trying to covertly pop another one of his soldier pills into his mouth. "Soldier pills?!" The Hyuuga girl ducked her head sheepishly, watching as Kabuto stomped over and demanded them from the Iwa-nin. "Give me those. They are meant to be used *sparingly*, and only in an emergency—in a fight! They are chakra supplements, *not* food!"

"Ah, but K-Kabuto-kun... We haven't been able to uh, get enough food... PI-Plus it's much easier just to..." Hinata trailed off under his glare, having finally extracted the case of the pills from Deidara. She hastily stuck out her arms from her sides again, holding still for his examination.

"You are underfed, Hinata-chan. No more soldier pills—except in cases of *extreme* emergency. Not when you're tired or need a boost of energy." The silver-haired shinobi sighed again, and continued his examination jutsu. He couldn't help but feel a slight surge of pride, however, to see that the internal injuries he had healed years before had been completely restored to their former health. She had a few hastily mended scratches and past injuries, but nothing damaging. Aside from the lack of proper nutrients in her system, she seemed to be in pretty good health. "It looks like you're alright. Just eat a bit more. It hasn't affected your weight much, though it had been getting to the point where it could have affected your fighting ability, reflexes, thinking, things like that. I think it's too late for Deidara." He elicited a small smile from her, but surprisingly, the blonde didn't retort. "It seems that if you just get some proper vitamins and minerals in you, you'll be fine. Though you're nearing the end of your monthly cycle, so also there could be some emotional instability as well, so keep that in mind."

The kunoichi turned as red as he had ever seen her and the bird they were riding on ducked dangerously low. After they had recovered their balance, Hinata apologizing the whole time, Deidara actually asked, "Monthly cycle? What are you two talking about now, yeah?" And he promptly found out that it was possible for her to blush even harder.

"If you don't know by now, you don't deserve to know," the medic replied smoothly, standing shakily back up on the moving clay. He glared boredly at Deidara—until he noticed that he somehow had *another* soldier pill in his hand, and was grinning. "Where did you get that?!"

"I have another two cases. I stocked up in the last village we visited—you know, before you existed in this team? Yeah?" He cackled, shoving it in his mouth as the Oto-nin tried to get it away from him. Unfortunately that plan didn't work as well as he'd hoped. Kabuto just punched him in the stomach, effectively making him spit it out. "Augh—hey! Bas—I mean, jerk, yeah!" The medic found it only mildly interesting that he cut off the curse.

"Give them to me. *Now*." He held out his hand impatiently. Deidara looked at it for a moment, then shook his hand gleefully, making sure to lick him thoroughly with the mouth on his palm. Kabuto suppressed a twitch and wiped his hand on his pants. He made another lunge for the

blonde—and more importantly, his backpack—but instead this time he jumped *off* the bird.

"Deidara-kun!" Hinata gave a shout, as both ninja hurried to peer over the edge of the clay bird's body. The blonde was grinning up at them from his *own* bird, a bizarre, double-winged type that was flitting along just below them. "Oh... Th-Thank goodness..." She sighed in relief.

"Get back up here if you want me to give you any sort of medical attention." It may not have sounded like much, but actual medical attention (*especially from a medic as skilled as me*, he couldn't help but think haughtily) was worth more than gold or most other things to shinobi. That's why medics were so highly valued. Still, Deidara didn't seem fazed. He just gave him the finger, crossed his legs and sat down on his own bird. "Fine. Starve to death and see if I care."

"Kabuto-kun!" He gave a slight start in surprise, and turned to the owner of the soft voice. "H-He is just... ah... being a-a shinobi. Give him some time...?" She looked at him with her wide, white eyes, pleading. Kabuto supposed he should be grateful; she was the one who had stopped the would-be fight between he and the Iwa-nin. With that look and that tone of voice, he could see just how motherly the Hyuuga was. It also brought back the curious question of the kiss on the top of his head from last night. Was she honestly *that* maternal of a person? It wasn't very kunoichi-like.

Still, his mission wasn't to ponder the girl's personality.

"I'll see to him when he calms down. ...Still, he's acting more like a child than a ninja. How do you deal with such immaturity?" He easily changed the subject, pocketing the soldier pills and making a note to go through Deidara's stuff at the first chance he got for the rest. "Or have you had practice with Kiba and Naruto these past few years?"

Kabuto couldn't help but smile a bit when she reddened. He silently congratulated himself on bringing up the old names; mutual acquaintances would help her to trust him further. Hinata hadn't changed at all these past few years.

--.-

The medic-nin was mostly silent for the rest of the day, just gathering information. He and Hinata had had to switch over birds; she obviously wasn't used to controlling her own creation for as long as she had. Deidara hadn't been happy about it, though his bizarre double-winged creature was almost twice as fast as the Hyuuga's just-as-bizarre dove-like creation. The wind whistling past his ears for hours on end was starting to irritate him and mess with his mind a bit. (*The whine it's like the death cry it's like a death machine it's going to drive me crazy*, his thoughts in confused fragments. Memories usually didn't mix with his conscious mind that well.) Kabuto also had to wonder if that's what happened to Deidara.

He learned just of what they had gone through since Deidara killed Orochimaru. Contrary to his prior belief, he hadn't taken the kunoichi right after he killed the Sannin. Kabuto listened intently, analyzing this valuable information. They had already fought Itachi and Kisame, though they had met Kakuzu and Hidan as well. From his previous time under Orochimaru, he had briefly met each of the Akatsuki, though Hidan stood out rather brightly in his memories. He wasn't a character you forgot easily.

Interesting... Hinata has suffered through the Tsukuyomi, the Oto-nin thought slyly, resisting the urge to smirk. *I wonder what she saw...*

Kabuto also learned that they were severely behind schedule, and that there would be several sleepless nights ahead of them. They would have approximately three to three and a half weeks left to get to Amegakure; it would be quite a stretch. (Plus they had to *find* the damn thing.)

It was nearing sundown when Kabuto made his first mistake. He asked, "Deidara-san, why do you want to join the Akatsuki so much?"

The blonde, once again sitting dangerously on the bird's head, went rigid and the clay beneath them shuddered slightly. He slowly turned around to look at him, the chill wind whipping his hair around his face. "...*You* were in the Akatsuki, under the snake, weren't you? Why don't *you* tell me, yeah? Come to think of it, why don't you tell us both about some of the other members, the ones we still have to fight?"

He knew instantly that he was on dangerous ground. Deidara still suspected him of several things, and this had to be one of them. Obviously he really *was* a genius to draw that conclusion so quickly and be able to vocalize it so carefully. (Hinata, on the other hand, just blinked and slowly turned her head to stare at him as well.) "Well... I was mainly just with Orochimaru... I didn't see much of the other members, truthfully," Kabuto stated calmly, though his mind was racing. These were very dangerous waters. He couldn't lie much without getting caught in it, but he couldn't give too much away.

Deidara's expression clearly replied "Bullshit you don't know."

Continuing, he pushed his glasses up further on his nose, and instead turned his gaze to the Hyuuga. "There are now only nine members, since you killed one. Presumably, the leader of Akatsuki would prefer for you to replace him; you're the most likely candidate at this time."

"We already know that, yeah," the explosives expert said crossly, narrowing his eye.

"Wh-Who else is in it...? We've already fought two of them... an-and met two others..." Hinata added softly, pressing her fingers together nervously. Kabuto raised his eyebrow at that, thinking that that habit of hers had been long gone.

"And whom did you fight, then?" he asked evenly. He could still talk himself out of this.

"Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame. And we've met Hidan and Kakuzu." Deidara was obviously losing his patience. He was bound and determined to get some straight answers that he *liked*, and Kabuto could see that.

"There's only nine. You've met four. You'll still need to fight those two, Orochimaru's old partner, the leader and his partner, and then one other pair." He was restating common sense, but it was buying him time. Did he want to give out names? "The other pair, I believe, would be Zetsu and his partner, Tobi. I'm not sure about the leader or his partner, but I do know a bit about Hidan and Kakuzu's fighting style and abilities."

No harm done if I state the obvious here... killing two birds with one stone, he allowed himself a mental sigh (in relief) as he thought. The blonde bombshell visibly relaxed, and Hinata actually *did* sigh in relief. "Well... Hidan is immortal. He is a sadistic, cruel shinobi who also happens to be a masochist. Most attacks won't faze him in the least. Kakuzu is also unable to die, though in a more technical sense. I never did get any of the details..."

"Hurry up with it, yeah." The Iwa-nin didn't seem irritated or anxious any longer. He just leaned forward slightly, visible blue eye wide with curiosity. Apparently he was taking mental notes on his upcoming enemies and potential allies.

"Kakuzu is the powerhouse of the two. He will take out Hidan to get to his enemy—and he usually does. In fact, they fight each other more than their opponents in many cases..." He was losing his own patience, with Deidara's incessant questions and demands. The silver-haired medic readjusted his glasses again to compensate for the minor agitation.

"We-We already know that..." Hinata stated beside him, hardly audible over the rushing wind. He just spared her a curious glance and continued.

"Most likely you will be challenged by them next. Be *extremely* careful of Hidan's jutsu—most of it is *very* lethal. His favorite is some sort of bonding jutsu; any attack done to him is also done to whomever he casts it upon. There are a few stipulations, but basically, if he has you in that, you're as good as gone."

Deidara smirked in a twisted way. *No doubt he thinks he has a strategy to counteract that...if he even is a strategist...*

-.-.-

Kabuto was carefully quiet for the rest of the day, and even into the night. Deidara stayed awake, as he was controlling their bird, and he waved it off as nothing when asked. Apparently his suspicion decreased significantly toward the Oto-nin, or at least he acted less reserved and snippy toward him. He just frequently stared at the sky with an interesting expression on his face.

Hinata just informed him that he was in love with the sky.

Kabuto decided to agree with that. (He thought it was a bit odd for an Iwa-nin to be a pteromerhanophile, all the same.) Otherwise, aside from the slight nod he gave to her, he was content to watch, observe, and study them. But there wasn't much to study. Hinata hadn't changed, and as far as he was concerned, Deidara was an open book. On the other hand, the medic still hadn't gotten the opportunity to give him the physical he needed. He was such a strange mixture of emotions and shinobi coldness, but at the same time, he wasn't at all difficult to read. (*Almost as if it's a façade, to keep me thinking that he's like that...* Kabuto mused. He liked mysteries. It wouldn't hurt to give his mind something to play with, either.)

The night went uneventfully, at least as far as shinobi went.

At least they weren't attacked.

Kabuto stayed awake, not trusting Deidara enough to fall asleep in his presence, wanting to keep an eye on Hinata, and still keeping his mission goals in mind. Deidara also stayed alert and awake, thought his eyes were glued to the stars. (It was a beautiful, if crisp, clear night out. The stars twinkled brightly overhead as their breath came out in a mist.) The kunoichi of their team was conscious as well, though looking the sleepest. She sat slumped against the bird's head at Deidara's feet, white eyes staring off into space and memories. Every time she did doze off, however, she woke not five minutes later with either a gasp, a squeak or a jolt. Kabuto surmised that these were the nightmares she mentioned, though at least she hadn't woken up screaming.

The Oto-nin didn't say anything when Deidara offered them both soldier pills for the caffeine, though his medic senses were shouting and screeching at him. Especially since he and the Hyuuga both took one. (*Ah, hypocrisy is such a wonderful thing.*)

It was a good thing they took them. The sun was just peeking over the far, flat horizon when the attack Kabuto had been expecting ripped up through the air. Sleep-deprived, their reflexes and reaction time suffered. The pillar of earth took the wing off of their bird, and suddenly all three were wide awake as they spiraled downward.

Unfortunately, their assailants didn't even wait for them to hit the ground before attacking again. This time a fireball roughly the size of a house came instead of the earth, and it only confirmed Kabuto's fears on who they were facing off against. Only now they were free-falling with flaming bits of clay raining down around them, with no way to stop or even slow their descent.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Can those three fight as a team, even to save their own lives? And even if they can manage, could they take on their newest Akatsuki opponents?

Lose the Blood, Kill the Hearts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara hit the ground running. His knee hurt from that landing, but he couldn't afford to stop and inspect it. Already his enemy (*enemies*, he corrected himself) had managed to wound him and separate him from his partner—*team*, he corrected himself again. It was probably a very stupid move on his part—though it could turn into a mistake for the enemy as well. A shinobi separated from his team can get desperate. And there is nothing more dangerous than a desperate ninja.

He heard a whistling in the air, and instinctively threw himself to the ground. Deidara rolled onto his back, looking up into the fuchsia eyes of Hidan.

"You're not too fast, are you?" The Akatsuki member asked with a sneer. The Iwa-nin below him glanced out of the corner of his eye to see his three-bladed scythe inches from his ear. "Looks like your trip ends here, pretty-boy. Too fucking bad for you."

"Yeah, right." The blonde grinned back up at him, disappearing in a puff of smoke. Deidara swung down from the tree above him, landing a solid kick square in the middle of his back. Then, using his back as a ramp, he stepped up onto Hidan's head and pushed him into the dirt as he jumped back up to land in the tree branch.

Unfortunately, that only seemed to set the white-haired ninja off. He nearly slashed open Deidara's calf with his scythe as the blonde disappeared back into the tree. Hidan made a sound between a snarl and a scream, and was on Deidara in the next moment, slashing and hacking away with his blades. The Iwa-nin, who had no idea that he was that fast, barely had time to slip a kunai out of his pouch and parry the relentless attacks.

Worse, he was in quite possibly the worst possible position to be defending himself. His legs were crouched beneath him, on the tree branch, and his back was forcefully pressed against the trunk. Deidara had no idea how the manic man assaulting him was managing to negotiate around all of the branches around them with his large scythe, but he sure as hell was. Finally, as he felt the bark in his back cracking and giving, he decided he'd had enough of this. It was time to move. *Now*.

Somehow, (though not without damage to his tailbone he'd be feeling later), he managed to get one leg out from under him and planted it firmly on Hidan's chest. The immortal's eyes widened slightly at the contact, a mere moment (even by shinobi standards) before he was kicked downward and away.

Several things happened at once, in a rather confusion way. Either by accident or out of spite, the missing-nin had practically *thrown* his scythe in Deidara's face. The blonde had no choice but to catch it—by the blades—with his hands. It stung a bit, but then again, hand injuries always hurt more for him, he felt.

Unfortunately, he hadn't noticed the rope attached to the other end. As Hidan hit the ground, after snapping off the end of the branch, (*at least the ground cracked beneath him*, a sardonic little voice said in his head) he yanked his wrist back, and Deidara's eye widened as he saw the other end of the rope. The blades shot out of his hands with a soft *snick* sound, and he bit back a gasp and stared down at the blood suddenly covering his hands. Hand injuries for him were *bad*. Very, very bad. It not only hindered jutsu—which was probably what the white-haired bastard was aiming for—but slashed-open mouths can't chew or mold clay or chakra very well.

Hidan jumped back up to his feet, as the Iwa-nin carefully swung down from the tree. He didn't dare wipe his hands on his pants to get the blood off; his hands were damaged enough already without getting unnecessary dirt in the cuts. "Huh..." Unconsciously, Deidara had been staring wide-eyed at the blood, trying to lick some of it off, and barely heard the Akatsuki member speak. (*When was the last time I got a hand injury...?*) His opponent was idly examining the rust-red liquid dribbling down his blades, as if it was hardly worth his while to look at it. "I want to have a bit more fun with you. Leader-sama said we were to *test* you, and he didn't say we couldn't toy with you."

"Wow. A whole three sentences without swearing, yeah." Deidara heard himself say, and nearly laughed because of it. Comments like that just came out of him sometimes, completely free of his control. Usually they only made the situation worse, but most of the time it was worth it.

"Fuck you to hell!" Hidan barked, giving him a one-fingered salute. The explosives expert was about to reply with his own, but then he realized—a moment too late—that the gesture was only a ruse so he could start a jutsu. "*Chimatsuri no jutsu!*"

"Shi—" Deidara started signing as well, but got halted halfway as the world around him suddenly went black. It was as if a heavy black curtain fell all around him. "Genjutsu?! You think some genjutsu can stop me, yeah?!" He cackled, albeit nervously. He brought up his hands again to release it, but then he noticed that apparently his hands had gotten worse.

He was soaked in blood.

His arms were completely crimson, and he could feel it dripping down onto his face and into his hair. His clothes were all red as well, and he seemed to be literally *saturated* with blood.

Now, Deidara wasn't exactly squeamish, by anyone's standards, but for some reason a sudden, growing *fear* of the blood settled over him. He wanted to get this stuff off, *now*. He absently rubbed his hands down his arms, but that didn't do anything, except add disgust to the mix as his tongues slid over the slick skin. A trickle of blood made it's way over the scope's lens, and, even as a small part of his mind (*it's the genjutsu*; it was his shinobi training) protest, Deidara could feel himself loosing it.

He *needed* to get this stuff off *now*.

The temporary redhead—*oh my god it's turning my hair red*—swiped his bangs out of the way, rubbing frantically at the lens. It didn't do anything to clear his vision. Being half blind (well, technically he could see red) only added to his growing panic. He continued wiping at it, but it did nothing, though the mouths on his palms were getting sick of the taste of blood.

"I-I just need to calm down, yeah," Is what he would have like to have said to himself, to reassure himself, but the ninja only got the first two words out before another stream of blood worked its way into his mouth and cut him off. He spat the foul-tasting liquid out, trying to wipe his mouth off as well. It only smeared the blood. Worse, that coppery, disgusting taste was still on his tongue; he couldn't get rid of any of it.

The world was completely black all around him, and started to press in on him. He felt suffocated, pressured. The blood wasn't drying; it wouldn't dry so it could crack and be wiped off easily. This was demon blood. It was *staying* on him. That only increased his urge to get it off all the faster.

Deidara desperately rubbed at his arms, but they stayed resolutely bloody. His sense of panic—or hysteria—was rising steadily, and all shinobi sense was gone. He *needed* to get away from the blood... all of the blood...

The last straw was when another drip of blood fell into his open eye, temporarily blinding him. No shinobi ever wants to be blind; it's one of their worst nightmares. He shouted hoarsely and scratched frantically at his face, trying to get the horrid red stuff off of him. Deidara tore off his mesh top, but that did nothing; it was soaked as well as his shirt and skin underneath. Rubbing his upper arms, in an almost comforting way, the Iwa-nin blinked rapidly and looked around for something to get the blood off with.

There was nothing around. Absolutely nothing.

By now even his conscious mind was starting to realize his desperation and mania. His respiration and pulse quickened, and he felt himself break out in a chilling sweat. (But still the blood wouldn't come off.) He *needed* to get this off. The situation was rapidly becoming life-or-death, at least in his mind.

"I-I need... to get this off..." Deidara panted, staring down at his wrists with a blank gaze. Nothing was working. Sweat, tears, spit, sheer desperation... nothing was getting the blood off of his skin. Something had to—to rub it off, or scratch it off, or wash it—He blinked at that last sentence. Wash meant liquid and the only liquid he could think of right now was—

Blood.

With a dawning fear, he realized that there was blood *inside* of him as well. It was all over. Not just soaking him. He could feel it, in his hands, in his arms, in his chest and head and legs and *everywhere*. That revelation terrified him. "There's—There's even more bl-blood... yeah..." His voice came out quietly and with a tone of insanity he had never let himself slip into ever before.

Deidara needed to get rid of the blood. All of the blood. *All* of it.

But with a dismayed yelp, he noticed that he was missing his kunai pouch. His shuriken, too, and even his clay. There was nothing he could use to get the blood out of him. It was starting to pound in his ears, and he was struck with the sudden thought that *oh my god this blood is going to drown me*.

He *needed* to get this stuff *off*. Before he completely lost it.

Then the Iwa-nin realized that he wasn't out of weapons. He had teeth (three sets!) and fingernails. Almost eagerly, if not with a strained desperation, he began to dig his nails into his skin and rip open his arms. New, fresh blood coursed out of him, and he felt relief. *I can get this out of me*, came the thought, accompanied by a manic grin.

But then he also realized that for all of the life that poured out of him, there was plenty more.

He was working himself into a frenzy now, frantically scratching, biting, ripping into himself. He dragged his nails down his cheeks, sliding down onto his neck and then onto his collarbone. Deidara felt the blood all around him, but he still couldn't get away from it.

And he was beginning to lose even what conscious mind he had left, trying to.

--.-

Hinata had landed more gracefully than Kabuto, and she assumed Deidara, too. Whereas the medic

nearly landed on their opponent, she had swung down through tree branches until she could get on the ground again, and then instantly set about attacking. Kabuto was already engaged in some minor taijutsu with the Akatsuki member—the taller one, the one Hinata barely remembered as Kakuzu—neither of them even really trying.

Luckily, Kakuzu was incredibly tall. He was a large target. And Hinata was small, and fast. She also had the Byakugan, so she felt reasonably confident about this match-up. The heiress had sparred with Kiba and Lee enough to know that raw strength was worthless if they couldn't catch you with it. She silently slipped around behind the fighting duo, gathering chakra into her hands. Kabuto noticed her, but like a good shinobi, didn't change his expression in the least. (*He's always so in control with his emotions*, she couldn't help but note.)

The Hyuuga charged, aiming for the rather abnormal chakra centered in his back. If it was some sort of weapon or special feature, it was best to take it out now. (Actually the man had four different anomalies like that, all on his back, it looked like. It made his chakra harder to read.)

But unexpectedly, the man didn't dodge; he ducked. Tripping her in the process, it only sent the dark-haired kunoichi flying into a surprised Kabuto, and both of them landed in a heap a few feet off. Kakuzu planted his foot squarely on her back, pinning them both to the ground quite efficiently. (As Kabuto was underneath her, he couldn't reach to do any damage, and Hinata couldn't get into an angle where she could do so.)

"Please tell me that that is *not* the best either of you could do. I am aware that we are supposed to be fighting Deidara... but this is just pathetic." It almost sounded like Kakuzu sighed. And it almost sounded like he had laughed when both shadow clones beneath his foot disappeared in puffs of smoke. But it didn't sound like anything when the large man was actually *surprised*.

Hinata had figured out after a momentary pause that the chakra anomalies in his back were *hearts*. Kabuto apparently already knew that. (*So this is what he meant when he said that Kakuzu was immortal on a technicality*, the kunoichi thought vaguely.) So they would have to kill him *five times*—if he still had his regular heart, though she assumed that was true as well. But with some carefully controlled shadow clones, a lot of chakra expenditure and a great deal of luck, this would work and he would be down to three.

With the Byakugan, she still had a great advantage, but that was true in any fight. Kabuto's medical skills were also a huge help in this fight. Or, at least, they were going to be.

But Kakuzu didn't look very happy when Hinata and Kabuto burst out of a pair of trees to attack again, this time getting closer to an actual attack. He looked even angrier when both of those disappeared in puffs of smoke as well.

Only now Hinata was starting to feel some pressure. She wasn't as skilled as Kabuto, or Naruto, or Deidara, or anyone else. She could only produce so many shadow clones, and only her chakra control had allowed her to make a third. She would need the rest for attacking and as a fallback. The Hyuuga watched silently as the pair of clones this time got under Kakuzu's guard, and each managed to hit him once (at least, she saw blood) before the Akatsuki member made them disappear as well.

Here goes everything, the Hyuuga thought morosely, and this time charged out herself. Judging by Kakuzu's reaction, he clearly saw her and the real-Kabuto running in from his other side as a couple more shadow clones.

Kabuto ducked the man's first block, and sidestepped to avoid his second. Hinata, for her part, also dodged and got close enough. She pumped as much chakra as she could into her hand, aiming

exactly for the nearest heart—the top-left on his back. The *Juuken* hit a strange lump—a casing of some sort for the heart. But, even if it surprised her, the kunoichi felt her chakra force it's way into her enemy's system, and destroyed the heart. She felt the casing waste away at the same time that she felt a sharp jab to her stomach.

The pain wasn't physical; it just meant that Kabuto had succeeded—in fact, went overboard, if anything. While she had taken out one heart with her *Juuken*, he had used his *Shosen no jutsu* to cut through another one of Kakuzu's organs. (Judging from the angle, it would have been the one actually located in his chest.) The chakra had cut clean through his body, and ended up hurting Hinata on the other side, though that turned out to be a virtue.

The Byakugan user dropped to the ground, clutching her stomach and retching, just as Kakuzu swung around to take her head off with a chop. He missed because of that, and that also gave Kabuto time to get away from his immediate striking range.

"Hinata-chan! Duck!" He shouted; of course Kakuzu ducked as well. But it appeared to be a ruse, a wonderfully simple, brilliant ruse. Instead of attacking, Hinata felt his arms wrap around her shoulders and haul her upward, and then finally away.

"Wh-Why did you use so much chakra...?" She gasped out, rubbing her stomach as she winced. He at least had the grace to pretend to look apologetic.

"I was also aiming for his lung." He chirped pleasantly, rubbing the back of his head. The gesture only served to further mess up his hair, though.

"Why, you little bastard, you think you're smart?!" He snarled, whirling around with a rustle of his black cloak. With an inhuman speed, Kabuto suddenly disappeared, and reappeared next to him. Only Hinata realized that this was not another attack—by the medic, anyway. The Oto-nin was bound tightly in some sort of thick, black cords, gagging and restraining him. Kakuzu calmly ignored Hinata, undoubtedly smirking smugly under his mask as he turned to his captive. "How about I snap your neck now? Or I'm sure a medic's heart would be nice a healthy and strong; I could rip that out of your chest right like so..."

Kabuto's eyes widened behind his glasses, especially as Kakuzu's hand thrust forward, aimed at his chest.

He and the kunoichi present both did something at the same time.

The ex-spy jumped, as far as his binding would allow, just as the immortal's hand went clean through his body. A little splatter of blood hit the grass behind them, but neither shinobi paid any heed. Kakuzu glared darkly at his own arm, thrust through Kabuto's at a downward angle, but completely missing anything vital. The best he could hope for now was to either let him bleed to death or jerk his arm to the side and snap his spine.

Hinata gasped involuntarily as she witnessed that, but she was bent on her own attack. She had never destroyed her clay creation from earlier, only shrunk it and kept it in her backpack when Deidara hadn't been looking. (Honestly, the heiress got attached to her little birds. Even though they were cute, in a child-like way, she felt proud that they were *hers*, and, if imperfect, they were hers alone.) The kunoichi enlarged it again, evoking a humorously shocked expression from Kakuzu as, with a fierce swipe of her arm, the bird pelted forward.

The attack probably would've worked, at least as an effective way to get Kabuto away, if it weren't for the fact that the tall ninja was Akatsuki, not some run-of-the-mill rogue. Before the clay could impact, they both disappeared, and Hinata stiffened as she felt a presence behind her and Kakuzu's

free hand landed lightly on her shoulder. (The bird was looking around in confusion, before turning back to look at its creator.)

"You two are annoying. Not only did you *somehow* manage to kill me twice already, but you're both wasting my time with these petty parlor tricks. Just tell me where Deidara is." He stated in a bored tone. It would have conveyed complete and utter indifference, had there not been an underlying tenseness or annoyance. Either way, the Hyuuga was scared that they managed to get the man that angry, that he couldn't even properly hide it.

Wh-What should I say...? I don't even know where Deidara-kun is...! She thought desperately, glancing around with her Byakugan. No one in sight for as far as she could see. (No one except the two behind her.) A warm drop of some sort of liquid hit the top of her head, and trickled down the back of her neck unpleasantly. But one look with her special eyes told her that it was Kabuto's blood, and the Akatsuki member's arm was still *in* him. She needed to do something.

"I—"

"We don't know where he is." The medic-nin snapped, cutting her off. He was glaring sideways up at his captor, smirking. "Your attack separated us. We have no idea. Otherwise, wouldn't we have waited to attack with him, better our chances?"

"Shut up." Kakuzu said dismissively, and wrenched his arm out of the younger's body. Kabuto grunted, and, still bound, fell forward onto the grass beside Hinata.

"We-We honestly d-don't know where he i-is...!" She pleaded, still casting about hastily for any sign of the explosives user with her Byakugan. (None.)

"...That asshole..." The masked shinobi narrowed his green eyes, glaring into space. He then turned his glare disdainfully downward, looking at the two before him. "You two are pathetic. I don't even want your hearts for compensation. Even a Hyuuga's." With that final snort, he turned on his heel and disappeared again. And the other two were left alone.

Kabuto sat up, the cords still holding him, and made a show of looking around. The Hyuuga beside him shook her head slightly, and he finally relaxed—as much as a shinobi in battle could. "Finally. Now, Hinata-chan, if you would be so kind as to help me with these..." He shrugged his shoulders as best as possible to refer to the cords.

Her white eyes visibly traveled downward to the gaping wound in his chest.

"I can finish healing myself once my hands are free." He added slowly, smiling uncertainly at her.

"Oh! Y-Yes, of course..." Properly chastised, she took out a kunai. The kunoichi started to work on sawing the cord around his ankles, while her clay bird fluttered back silently behind her, standing guard over them both. Its head carefully turned in all directions to survey the landscape for the slightest bit of movement.

There was the strange cord-like bindings around his ankles, knees, stomach, chest and neck, though it really seemed to just be a few long strings, knotted and crossing over each other so she really had to cut each one to free him. She was just slipping the blade underneath for the final cut on the cables around his knees when he flinched mightily and let out a curiously cut-off noise. "It-It's tightening...!" He gasped out, struggling actively. Her own eyes widened, and she hurriedly slid her hands—and the kunai—under the loops around his neck. They were tightening, at an alarming rate, and the heiress freed his neck.

The chest would be the ideal place to start cutting next; less damage to internal organs, especially his heart and lungs. But if she cut loose his hands (for they were bound to his sides by the cord around his stomach) then he could work to help her loosen and cut away the rest of them. It could be a difficult decision, but she only had a split second to think. The dark-haired kunoichi hurriedly set to work sawing and hacking away at the black cables constricting his chest.

They seemed more stubborn than the others, and Hinata was scared that she wouldn't be able to sever them before he suffocated. She nearly screamed when the loud *crack* of bones snapping came with another flinch from Kabuto. Finally, after what seemed like too many precious minutes, his chest was free, and the Oto-nin gratefully sucked in a few lungfuls of air.

There was another, horribly louder, crack before she managed to free his arms and body completely from the cords, and they both knew that his arms were now useless until they could be healed by a proper medic. Kabuto looked down at his limp limbs, blinking. Hinata felt guilty; if she had been able to free him sooner, he wouldn't have had his arms broken...

She looked up at him, about to apologize, when one of the previously lifeless-looking cords suddenly flung itself at her and wrapped itself around her neck before she had time to do more than offer a little scream.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: In the last Akatsuki match, they got away by running and sheer luck- and even that had left them almost dead. But Hidan and Kakuzu aren't nearly as easily fought as Itachi or Kisame was. Deidara's still trapped in the genjutsu, Hidan is playing with him, Kakuzu is stalking them both, Hinata is on a time limit, and Kabuto is incapacitated. How can you defeat two immortals?

Waiting in Line to Kill

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara grinned, gleeful and manic, conscious mind gone. Just like the genjutsu was designed to do. Hidan watched in utter delight as the blonde raked his own nails down his arms, scratching himself, letting the blood flow. Already one arm was covered, and the other was well on its way. The immortal gave his scythe a twirl, and set it blades-down in the dirt, leaning on the other end lazily. Life was good.

Unfortunately, angry stomping through the forest's underbrush to his right signified the arrival of one of the people Hidan absolutely did *not* want to see right now. His partner.

"Hidan, you asshole, Leader-sama said we're *both* supposed to test him!" Kakuzu snarled, forcing his way into the clearing; he snapped a full-grown tree in half with a small shove to get one of its branches out of his face.

"Hell *no*." The albino drawled lazily, flicking his eyes back to his victim. The blood was much more entertaining than his partner's anger. "I got to him first. Are you tired of playing with the other two already?"

"Kabuto should be dead and the kunoichi is worthless. Now release the fuckin' jutsu before I rip your heart out." The taller of the two Akatsuki members grabbed the shorter by his uniform's high collar, lifting him in the air by a few inches. Hidan squirmed a bit, glaring daggers, shuriken and kunai at him, but didn't do anything else to ruin the glaring match. After a long while, while Deidara was busy continuing to rip himself to pieces, Kakuzu set Hidan down and crossed his arms.

"Like you *would* rip out my heart. We've already tried that, remember? Didn't work too well, did it?" The red-eyed shinobi snickered. He grinned, but ducked his head a bit so that his collar hid it.

"I'll figure out a way."

"And where would you *put* the damn thing? Your back's taken, unless you wanna shove the thing up your ass?!" He snarled good-naturedly, and turned back again to watch the blood fest. *Much* more interesting than his partner. At this point, anyway, this was just token banter.

"In my back. You'd enjoy it too much otherwise." Kakuzu replied evenly, a hint of smugness actually entering his voice. Hidan snapped his head around to look at him, wide-eyed with shock.

"You actually *lost* a heart...?" He looked the missing-nin up and down, skepticism taking over surprise. "There ain't a scratch on you, liar."

"It was a medic and a Hyuuga. Do you think they need to leave outward signs of injury to attack?" Kakuzu was back in charge of the conversation, and they both knew it. Hidan had to be impressed; he hadn't pegged the kunoichi as that strong, or Kabuto, for that matter. (Meanwhile, Deidara was rediscovering the use of his legs, and that blood was in those limbs as well.)

"Wait, so they ganged up on you? Two little fuckers versus *you*? You're like, huge." The zealot held up his hands, measuring the difference in their heights. It was pretty drastic. The taller of the two snorted, one of his fingers twitching toward the shuriken pouch hidden underneath this cloak. Hidan didn't realize it, and just looked back up from his hands to Kakuzu's face. "You're a fucking

elephant, and those two heathens are mere, uh, flies or something. The bitch was tiny—but she did have *huge* tits—and Kabuto has always been a wuss."

"And yet I am missing two of my hearts because of them." He replied calmly, though he was still tensed for an attack on his annoying partner. "I demand payback. I claim your heart and the Iwa-nin's. So release the genjutsu and—"

"Aww, you *claim* my *heart*!" Hidan interrupted with a swoon, leaning up against Kakuzu's chest. He bristled and the Jashinist found himself sporting several kunai and shuriken in the back and shoulders. Cackling, he just brushed the weapons away, ignoring the blood.

"You little bastard, quit acting like a whore and stay the fuck away from me!" Kakuzu snarled, several of his black cords slithering out and wrapping themselves—tightly—around Hidan's neck.

He just grinned evilly at him. "Bondage?"

"I'll rip your heart out now—" Both shinobi froze, fight and positions forgotten in a heartbeat. The smell of blood pervaded the area, but it was lingering, fading. They slowly looked up, searching out their main target, cursing themselves for letting a fight get in the way (again) of a mission. For Deidara was gone.

--.-

Hinata gave a very feminine squeal, yanking at the sudden thread collar. It wasn't budging in the least, but at least, for the moment, it wasn't tightening, either. But the thing seemed to be made of iron, and short of plunging her kunai into her own neck to get the proper leverage needed to cut it away, it was staying. Kabuto got up on his knees, watching warily the remaining lengths of cable littered around them. (Luckily, they all appeared motionless and staying that way.)

"Are you alright?" He asked, rather needlessly. Aside from a stomachache, a killer collar, and a few minor bruises and burns, she was fine.

The heiress just nodded, tugging at the cord. "You...?"

The medic-nin looked down at his useless arms and the gaping wound in his chest. "I can't fight." Kabuto replied pointlessly, standing up. (A bit of a feat without arms to balance with or use.) "I can't heal or help either of you now."

"Will you..." Her pale eyes slipped down to the blood-soaked shirt, and she frowned faintly. "W-Will you... die...?" He looked mildly surprised by her question, but she couldn't help but feel that he gave her that expression just to reassure her. He never was one for openly and suddenly showing his feelings physically.

"Of course not. I'm a medic-nin." Once again, she had the feeling that he was doing pointless things to comfort her, but he continued. "Even when I cannot heal myself, which is a rare event, I have connections all over. In fact, I believe I have a rather reliable medic friend in a town not too far from here. Right now the biggest threat to me would be bleeding to death, unless Kakuzu decides to come back for us."

Kabuto looked calmly around the clearing, as if they weren't in such a horrible predicament. Hinata activated her Byakugan, regretfully searching the area. Nothing. They were alone, because no one

could fool the Byakugan. (Just to be sure, though, she took several steps to her right, and turned a half step, moving the blind spot. Still no one there.) "W-We're alone..." she breathed in relief.

"We can't face them at this time. Kakuzu probably won't continue fighting—he enjoys sulking more than that, anyway—and Hidan is slower. We should be able to escape." The Oto-nin said thoughtfully, glancing up toward the morning sun. "We would only need to find Deidara... if we have to..."

"We have to," the Hyuuga nodded firmly.

"Most likely... Hidan is trying to fight Deidara, but Deidara would have ignited his temper. But he should be able to dodge any real attacks quite well, unless he's injured. Kakuzu shouldn't have found them yet, though he may have. I can't be sure. But he couldn't have gone too far... his threads are still here..." Both ninja looked down to the innocent-looking black cord lying by their feet.

"What do you mean by that...?" she asked nervously, shifting her weight to her other leg. She was uncomfortably aware of the other length of cable around her neck.

"It is my belief that Kakuzu cannot go very far from his own threads. They follow him, are connected to his chakra. So if need be, we could, in theory, follow them—"

"Aaack!"

"—back to him. Hinata-chan...?" Kabuto raised an eyebrow behind his slipping glasses, as she stumbled back a step. Her hands were uselessly scrabbling at the collar, and the little cords on the ground were wriggling to life. "Don't strain against them, follow the tugging!" He warned hurriedly, just as she tried to regain her previous footing. Hinata nodded, frightened, and took another step backward, her head thrust backward by the neck.

"It-It's tugging... hard..." She explained helplessly. He just nodded sympathetically. Really, there was nothing they could do, at least by themselves. Their best chance was Deidara. Hinata turned around, led by the neck, almost looking as if something was dragging her along on a leash. The Konoha-nin couldn't help but whimper mutely as she was forced back toward the Akatsuki members. Kabuto stumbled along behind her, arms hanging limply by his sides, just as silently.

"Kakuzu is either looking for his partner or for Deidara..." He finally stated, after they had been force-marched a fair distance. Both were covered from minor scratches and bruises from tree branches and the occasional trip. Hinata just whimpered again in response, eyes shut in pain. The collar was tightening as well...

They came across a glorious break in the thick trees, a shallow stream. The sand around it was muddy and clung to their sandals, but both trudged on. Halfway across the stream, however, Kabuto stopped. He was looking on the opposite bank, and what was drying in the rising sun. Footprints. Very recently made, wet, footprints. (They weren't Deidara's size, and they didn't look to be Kakuzu's, but it could very well have been made by the other Akatsuki shinobi.) Hinata didn't notice, and stepped over them, and after a moment of thinking, Kabuto followed. "...Hinata-chan... can you activate your Byakugan? I think there may be someone very close by..." He asked quietly. His dark eyes glanced around uneasily.

She nodded, as best as she could, and reopened her eyes with the bloodline limit. "I can't s-see Deidara-kun... or either of the Akatsuki... bu-but there is a chakra anomaly in the water... upstream. It's moving slowly d-downstream..." The Hyuuga relaxed her eyes again, disengaging the power. She could do nothing about it, either way. And Kabuto couldn't do much else but find

out what it is.

He nodded, mutely, and disappeared into the shadows of the forest, doubling back. He may not be able to perform many jutsu, but he was still a skilled shinobi. The medic crouched down in the bushes, masking his own chakra and watching the burbling water. Nothing happened, for awhile, but then something disturbed the water's surface. It started out as a minute ripple, and then a larger one, and then a series of ripples. The running water around it halted and went glass-smooth. Slowly, quietly, a large form began to bubble upward, smoothing the water around it as it rose.

It took the shape of a man, and before it had fully formed, Kabuto knew who this was. The Oto-nin couldn't help but smirk to himself, watching intently as the details started coming out of the water. The man's hair shook out to be around shoulder-length, though sopping wet. His slanted, rimmed eyes looked around easily, and his mouth broke out into a broad grin.

Kabuto melted back into the shadows, to return to Hinata, and inform her that it was only a large fish. He didn't need to tell her about this interesting addition.

-.-.-

Deidara skip-stumbled along, cutting at himself with each raised leg. The blackness was still all around him, but it was a curious sensation; he could feel himself moving, and trees occasionally, and other things. He was *somewhere*, though he didn't know where. Honestly, the Iwa-nin was hoping to find something sharp to help get all of that nasty *blood* out of his body with. (He was running low already, though!)

He kept stumbling as he skipped happily along, more of the blood raining off in tiny droplets off his body with every step. He was slowing down, and getting clumsy and dizzy, but he didn't care. He was *so* close to ridding himself of the blood. Hopefully then it would all disappear.

But then, something interesting happened.

The black started to lessen.

It was as if a fog was lifting, and things went from pitch-black to a dark grey, and then to a hazy gray. Distinct shapes could be made out in the gloom. Deidara gleefully ran over to one, feeling it with his bloody hands. It felt like a tree, and a tree always had sharp branches! Anything to help with the blood loss! He searched along the trunk, but came up empty handed. And still, the black fog was lifting, and more and more things became visible.

He continued on, and found himself that he was an Iwa shinobi, and should have some sharp weapons somewhere. Curiously, he found them strapped to his leg, and a pouch of clay on his hip. He couldn't remember those ever being there before, but it was convenient. With a shrill giggle, he plunged his hand into the bag, cutting his fingers on the shuriken. No, that wouldn't do; kunai were much easier to cut with. Digging around some more, he finally found one of the knives.

Without hesitation, he shoved the blade into his thigh. But suddenly, that particular action brought *pain*. A lot of pain, very sharp, eye-opening pain.

The blonde's eye snapped open, and the genjutsu was immediately dispelled. Chest heaving, he looked down at himself. He was a bloody mess. "...Damn, yeah." Deidara swore, and gingerly took the kunai out of his leg. This was not a good thing, not at all. (*Lucky we have ourselves a so-*

called 'medic'... bastard had better be able to do something about this, he thought sourly, glaring down at the scratches on his wrists with contempt.)

The explosives expert glared around the surrounding forest, looking for Hidan. He would *kill* that bastard. That was a genius genjutsu move, Deidara couldn't deny it, but it was still just... bad. Worse yet, he realized that he was still scratching himself with his nails, unconsciously. *After-effects of the genjutsu*, he reassured himself, and unfortunately felt his sanity slip a bit back into that hemophobic genjutsu's mental state. He wiped his hands down on his pants, wincing at the hand injuries. Hand injuries were *not* good for him. Well, neither were the injuries on his legs, and especially on his wrists and face... but hands were the worst. He used them for seals *and* his jutsu, damn it!

"HIDAN!" Deidara bellowed to the morning sky. The Akatsuki should come running, and then he could take his revenge. (He *hated* genjutsu. Illusions weren't fleeting, they weren't art, and they were just *stupid*.) His azure eye glowered at the forest clearing as if it had done him a great wrong.

And his shout wasn't in vain; soon enough, he heard the tell-tale patter of footsteps coming hurriedly in his direction. Wrenching out a kunai and fixing a scowl on his face, Deidara prepared himself for the assault.

Unfortunately, the footsteps were not alone. Another, heavier set he could soon pick out with his sharp ears as well, and the rogue ninja prepared himself for a double attack. He could make out two figures in the forest's gloom—that weren't Akatsuki. The Hyuuga kunoichi and Kabuto stumbled out of the trees, worse-for-wear. In fact, it looked like the Oto-nin couldn't use his arms as well, and he had an interestingly gruesome hole through his chest. The navy-haired one beside him, however, didn't seem too bad, except that she was jerked forward by an invisible leash. Deidara cocked his head in curiosity at the black collar around her neck. Was it a jutsu?

"Bya-chan? What are you doing *here*, yeah? Where's the other one...?" He asked, confused. He had called for his opponent; he had thought that those two were fighting the other one... where was he, then? Had they killed him?

"L-Look out!" She gasped instead, pointing behind him. He ducked without question, and heard the rustle of a cloak as a giant form hurtled over him. The taller Akatsuki member, the one he had thought the other two shinobi were fighting, landed gracefully behind Kabuto and the Hyuuga.

Deidara, meanwhile, felt Hidan's sadistic presence behind him.

"Well, I hadn't imagined this scenario." Kakuzu drawled lazily, flicking his pale eyes down to the two before him. "I had thought you to be dead, Kabuto... and I don't much care about the Hyuuga girl. Instead, I have her with a thread, and you're still alive."

Kabuto just tilted his head back, glasses sliding down his nose, and smiled happily up at the masked man. "I *am* dead."

Hidan lashed out with his scythe, and Deidara just barely ducked. The loss of blood had made his movements sluggish and delayed. The Iwa-nin backpedaled as the blades came at him again, and they barely caught the edge of his shirt. (*Why aren't I wearing my fishnet...*? he couldn't help but wonder, no matter how bad the timing was of such a thought.) "Hold—still—pansy-ass—" The albino grunted, swinging away with his weapon of choice.

"Like hell, yeah." Deidara replied easily, feeling the soft snick of the blades as it just barely caught the edge of his foot as he back flipped.

"I'm going to fuckin' *slaughter* you—" Hidan snarled, but was cut off by another shout. One in a voice that belonged to none of them present.

"Get in line!"

And then a foot crashed into Hidan's head, sending him flying as a new shinobi landed deftly in the spot where the scythe-wielder had stood a split-second before. He held out his fist in a fighting manner, and grinned roguishly at Deidara, revealing fangs. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Who the hell is this newcomer, and what does he have against Deidara? But what about Hinata, and that choking collar, and what if Kabuto can't heal himself in time? Things are looking grim... (And where the heck have Neji and Sasuke been, I wonder...?)

The Second Coming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"We shouldn't have trusted that guy." Sasuke complained in a monotone. He was agitated and restless, and moreover annoyed at Neji's little stunt. His curse mark still itched occasionally, reminding him to keep the Sharingan down, too. So far, this self-appointed mission had gone to hell in a hand basket real fast.

The Hyuuga beside him just grunted by way of answer.

Sasuke bit back a growl, and suppressed the urge to use the Sharingan and use some horrible genjutsu on the infuriating brunette. "We shouldn't have trusted him. He was just another rogue, and he's only going to wind up getting in the way. The only advantage he had over us was the fact that he can still grin and bear it." He continued in a whine, almost trying to get a rise out of Neji.

He wasn't rewarded. The stoic jounin just jumped onto another branch, speeding up. Sasuke didn't even get a grunt this time.

"The guy was obviously insane. Even *Naruto* isn't *that* cheerful. Do you really want anyone like that near your cousin? Even if it's to take care of Deidara?" The Uchiha took a lower aim, and finally got something to show for it. Even if it was a few bruises.

Neji had stopped, backed up a few branches, and held out his arm. He smoothly clothes-lined Sasuke, catching him just under the chin with his elbow. The darker haired of the two did an awkward flip, and landed gracelessly on the next tree branch, glowering with red eyes. "That man is of no use to us. He won't *dare* touch Hinata-sama, nor will he get the chance to. He can't be traveling much faster than us, and I have the Byakugan. He won't get anywhere."

Sasuke scowled at him, reaching back slowly to grasp his katana's hilt. Neji glared back at him, Byakugan versus his Sharingan. Both then snorted and turned away from each other, crossing their arms in unison. *I can't stand that stuck-up snob*, Sasuke thought venomously, *but at least the fanged freak won't harm my mission to kill Itachi...*

--.-

Earlier that day, the strangest thing had happened. The two were traveling along, branch to branch, making exceptional time on the last direction they knew their targets had been going. But, just as they started to leap over a rather wide, slow river, *something* had burst out of it like some sort of demented fish. The thing had latched onto Sasuke's ankle with sharp little teeth, and from the sudden weight added, dragged both of them down into the water.

After a lot of splashing, flailing and random fire jutsus, he got the thing away from him and rejoined Neji on the opposite bank. The Hyuuga hadn't batted an eye through the whole thing, and he didn't flinch in the least when the water-thing came out again, and materialized into a shinobi. In fact, Neji just shifted so his still-unmarked Konoha hitai-ate caught the morning sunlight.

"You..." When the water finished dripping away, before them stood a peculiar-looking ninja. He

wasn't much taller than Sasuke, but he was much skinnier. He was *slim*, almost having a starved-look. His shoulder-length hair hung in damp locks, and his narrowed, slanted eyes regarded them both. He pointed at Sasuke, repeating, "You."

"What do you want?" The Uchiha had asked at the time, rude as always. He and his partner were both frowning, whereas their sudden guest was grinning broadly, showing off sharpened teeth.

The mysterious shinobi adjusted one of the belts on his shirt, hoisting it up a bit to keep it from slipping off his small frame. "You smell like Orochimaru." He said nonchalantly, reaching down to tighten a waterlogged sandal as well.

"I am not Orochimaru."

"I didn't say you were. You're just... like him." The slanted, feral eyes returned to his face, studying him. "Did you kill him?" He asked. Neji stiffened slightly, and Sasuke noticed he had narrowed his eyes.

"Why are you here? You obviously know it's Deidara who killed him. So why did you follow us?" Neji demanded, suddenly and harshly. He took both of the other two aback with his outburst.

Sasuke *had* thought that the man had looked familiar... though he couldn't quite place him...

Until the water-utilizing shinobi took one of the drinks off of his belt and took a long, loud slurp.

"*You*..." The Uchiha spat, narrowing his scarlet eyes menacingly. It was the same man who had stopped them before, looking for Deidara. But now what was he up to?

"Oh, I *thought* it was the Iwa-nin who killed Orochimaru. I wasn't sure." The man grinned cheerfully, closing his light eyes. "Thanks for clearing that up for me! Oh, and telling me his name, too!" Neither genius rose to his bait. "...I'm still curious as to *your* connection to the snake," he pointed lazily with his drink's straw at Sasuke again.

The two remained quiet in the face of that quiet remark.

But neither did their verbal opponent speak. He just continued smiling, tilting his straw toward Sasuke. Finally, it was Neji who spoke, and again was blunt. "Who are you?"

There was a slight pause where their follower thought it over. He was probably choosing what words to use, what information to disclose. "...I'm the second coming." Sasuke sighed mentally; it was a stupid, arrogant reply, and nothing more.

But still, his Hyuuga partner persisted, "Of whom?"

"The demon of the bloody mist." This was just as arrogant of a statement, but only because Sasuke knew what he meant. His Sharingan eyes widened slightly, and his brows came down as he frowned. The pale-haired shinobi looked pleased and took another drag on his beverage.

The brunette Hyuuga noticed his comrade's expression and asked nothing more. Sasuke paused for a long while, then finally asked, "You... knew Momochi Zabuza...?"

Even Neji recognized that name. He was a bit criminal from the Mist, a few years ago. You could still find his picture and information in some of the older bingo books. It made it apparent that this man was definitely a Kiri-nin, though missing or not was still up for debate. The now-declared Mist shinobi closed his eyes in a pleased (and somewhat smug) grin. "You knew of Zabuza-sempai?"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes back into slits. If this was a verbal battle of alliances, he could top this guy's teacher any day. Having the Copy-Nin has a teacher gave him that privilege. It was just irony that it was Kakashi that killed Zabuza, all those years ago. "It was my teacher that killed him. He and Haku. Hatake Kakashi."

"Haku was weak, anyway. It was probably his fault he died." Unfazed, the cheerfulness continued. Neji, lost, stayed quiet. "So you're the student of the Copy-Nin? That's... nice. But he's not one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen of the Mist, and nor are you."

Sasuke looked the man over again. There was no sword, especially one large enough that was characteristic of that particular group, on his body or anywhere nearby. And it was even quite tempting to point out that *he* was the one with the katana in a sheath on his back, not the supposed swordsman. "...You aren't, either." The Uchiha said instead, smug.

"I know who you are." The supposed student of Zabuza said suddenly, and his grin increased tenfold. The expression was that of a cat sitting over a rather delectable fish in a fishbowl, though slightly creepier. Very predatory, regardless, especially with his sharpened teeth.

Sasuke just raised an eyebrow, and Neji snorted softly as he crossed his arms. Both were skeptic. True, in Konoha, they were both rather renown jounin, but it wasn't likely that this man had heard much about them.

"You're Uchiha Sasuke, aren't you? Favored pupil of the Copy-Nin... one of the last Uchiha in the world... And of course, now I know your connection to Orochimaru. You have his seal, don't you? You tried to go to him, didn't you?" The Kiri-nin took a step forward, and practically purred his questions. "You know a great many things... that I need to know."

Since the Uchiha was temporarily shocked into silence by the surprising fountain of knowledge before them, Neji stepped up to the plate. "So who are *you* to track Deidara? How do you know so much about Orochimaru?"

A look of false, overdramatic surprise overtook the stranger's features as he turned to look at Neji. "Why, *I* wanted to kill Orochimaru. I was one of his experiments. I want to kill the man who took the privilege away from me. ...He's not stronger than me. He just got to the snake first."

"So you're going to kill him."

"Yes. I'm going to. Why are *you* two tracking this Deidara guy?" The pleasantries were back.

"He was last flying in that direction." Neji carelessly pointed in the general direction of where they had been heading to.

The slanted eyes slid down a notch, and he stepped smoothly over. He put his arm on Neji's shoulder and his hand was limply cast downward at the earth. The Hyuuga looked calmly back at him, not saying anything. "I'll thank you for this later," the Kiri-nin said deliberately, smiling in a way that could only be described as seductive. When Neji's fist crashed into the side of his face, however, he just disappeared in a splash of water and was gone.

-.-.-

"You're just angry because Deidara is your last link to your brother." Neji hissed under his breath,

only half intending for Sasuke to hear him. They were traveling once more, and his shinobi sense was telling him that he was close. Close to what, he had no idea, but it was something big and chakra-filled. "Hinata-sama is still a Konoha kunoichi, and *should* be our main target. She's a human life, a skilled shinobi, and also the heir to the Hyuuga clan. She is important, not just to me, but to the village and our clan diplomatically and literally. We have to get her first, then you can go after *your* target."

"I was chosen for this mission, assigned it. I didn't have any choice in the matter in the first place. I'm only continuing this because of Itachi. Your cousin is of little consequence to me. If that Kiri-nin takes away the closest chance I have at a shot of revenge, I'm going to go on a rampage. You—after the Kiri-nin—are first on my hit list." Sasuke replied dispassionately. Both were much more honest (blunt was probably a better word) with each other after their fight, but it didn't help their relationship.

"You have no morals."

"Shinobi aren't supposed to have any." It was a low blow, bringing up the age-old standard of what a ninja should be, and Neji stayed predictably silent after the retort. Sasuke smirked to himself, and ignored the twinge the cursed mark gave his shoulder. He could deal with that later, anyway.

"Well then," After a long while, Neji spoke up again. "It seems that both of our interests would like us to hurry. Shall we speed up?" He asked curtly. The Hyuuga jounin could have just as easily sped up himself, and let Sasuke follow suit, but the sound of his voice irritated Sasuke and he probably knew it.

"We shall." The avenger replied, just as simply and shortly. He'd get back at the stuck-up ninja soon enough, after the important things were taken care of. Then he would have his evil, sadistic, pain-filled way with him.

The Caged Bird just continued blithely on, ignorant or uncaring of the plotting going on behind him. His white eyes were focused on one thing and one thing only—the safe retrieval of his cousin. *Don't worry, Hinata-sama. I'm coming*, he thought darkly, cracking the branch below him with a surplus of angry chakra. His Byakugan still hadn't picked anything up, even with its impressive range, but it couldn't be long now. His shinobi's sense told him that he was getting closer to whatever it was, and his bloodline limit would be the first to pick it up. Sasuke could only try to keep up then.

Neji focused his brainpower on coming up with a suitable strategy for the quick retrieval of Hinata and the painful killing of Deidara. He knew the Iwa-nin's fighting style fairly well by now, at least well enough to come up with a way to beat it. His clay was mainly long-range, which worked out fine, as Neji was a closer-range fighter anyway. Deidara's taijutsu was about average for a jounin, so he had the advantage over him. He could probably disarm the bombs if need be, anyway, with his *Juuken*. Sasuke surely wouldn't oppose to getting Hinata out of the way before joining in the fight himself. It was a sound strategy, if a bit vague, but it was also very likely to work.

Just keep at it with taijutsu, and don't let him get away from your *Juuken*.

Simple enough, right?

But then they came across the beginning signs of a large fight, and both jounin saw that it would be anything but simple. Because coming in the range of the Byakugan were two figures wrapped in black cloaks emblazoned with red clouds, clashing with two very familiar shinobi. This was going to be much, much more difficult.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: It's a battle royale between some of the toughest shinobi around! Only the sides get blurred and teammates are liable to start attacking each other in this free-for-all! Deidara has to fend off both the mysterious Kiri-nin and Hidan, whereas those two are too busy fighting over who gets to fight the Iwa-nin to care. Kakuzu wants a piece of him as well, but with the arrival of Neji and Sasuke, he may just have his hands full. But what's this? Hinata is fighting Sasuke? Sasuke is after Kabuto, and the unnamed 'second coming' has just noticed the Hyuuga heiress. Everyone's out to get something, and with shinobi at this level, not much can stop them from reaching their goals-except each other. What will happen? Tune in next time, for the twenty-fifth installment of Dark Knight!

Her Breaking Point, His Opportunity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Oh, *shit*!" Deidara yelped, ducking as best he could given that two high-level shinobi were trying to attack him simultaneously. But luckily for him, neither Hidan or whoever-the-heck-this-guy-was seemed to be on the same side. And what he had took for an attack on his own body was actually a lunge for the newcomer by Hidan—he evidently didn't appreciate that kick very much.

"You—bastard—I'll—fucking—kill—you—" He roared, barking out another word with each swing of his scythe.

The sharp-toothed ninja apparently wasn't quite as fast as the Akatsuki member was, and his dodges and ducks were starting to get dangerously close. Hidan saw this, and pressed his advantage, forcing him backward. Kakuzu watched them boredly from a safe distance away, still behind Kabuto and the Hyuuga.

Deidara quietly tiptoed away, hoping not to draw their attention. Instead, Kakuzu decided to take his own initiative and left the other two to stand behind the blonde. It was almost comic how he backed into the taller man's chest, then looked up, eye widening and mouth dropping. Kakuzu snickered, and grabbed his ponytail before he could run away. Lifting him by the hair, he looked him in the eye and stated, "You're causing an awful lot of trouble. I think I'll save us all some time and sanity and kill you now."

"But what would be the fun of that, yeah?" Deidara asked hopefully, grinning.

Luckily for him, his rescuer came in the form of the only kunoichi present. She slid in between the two men and delivered a *Juuken* strike to Kakuzu's chest, afterward kicking off of him and using that to break his grip on Deidara as they both tumbled away. Unluckily for him and her both, they tumbled right in the middle of Hidan and his opponent.

The two shinobi looked down at the surprised duo, while Kakuzu swore in the background. "...I get to kill him." The fanged ninja said after a moment, and dropped down with a kunai, intent on burying it in Deidara's neck.

"LIKE HELL." Hidan caught him halfway down in a tackle, and they both went sprawling in the grass. Deidara and his partner sat up, looking after them. But then the Konoha-nin noticed that Hidan had left behind his scythe with the physical assault. She crawled over and hesitantly touched the staff.

"Bya-chan? What is it—oh, yeah! The bas—jerk's scythe!" The Iwa-nin beamed at her and helped her up as she picked it up.

"I-It's surprisingly heavy..." She murmured, testing its weight in her hands. She swung it a few times, nearly decapitating Deidara, but got the hang of it rather quickly.

"Can you use it?" He asked curiously as he took a few precautionary steps backward, out of her range. The navy-haired ninja nodded slowly. Her Byakugan was active, and no doubt that would only increase her chances with the newfound weapon. It was the best chance they had.

"Waitagoddamnminute—YOU LITTLE BITCH YOU HAVE MY SCYTHER!" Almost on cue, Hidan noticed its disappearance, but was temporarily distracted again when the Kiri-nin's fist

connected with his jaw. The bickering pair continued to tussle, leaving the thieves alone for the time being.

"Hinata!" Kabuto shouted, from across the playing field. Her head turned, and unfortunately Kakuzu chose that moment to time his attack. His whole *arm* shot off from his body, connected and propelled by even more of the black cords. He caught the thread around her neck and dragged her back to him before anyone else could react.

He tightened the hold on her neck, and she was obviously struggling to breathe. But before he could harm her further, the Hyuuga dropped the scythe, brought her hands together, and shouted, "*Juuryokuba no jutsu!*" Unfortunately, without the proper time to better control the jutsu, it apparently encompassed the whole clearing. All Deidara knew was that one second he was forming his own seals, and the next, he had slammed into the ground with a rather sickening crunch.

The blonde found he couldn't get up again, either. The gravity was pulling him towards the dirt and crushing his lungs. He heard a loud gasp somewhere behind him, and then a splash. (Which was odd, considering the nearest river was several miles to the west.) Deidara heard footsteps, and black, sandaled feet appeared in his limited field of vision. Then the gravity resumed its normal force, and he felt light as a feather.

The explosives expert bounded to his feet, panting for air. A concerned kunoichi was standing beside him, looking stricken. "I-I'm sorry, I co-couldn't control it v-very well..." She said hurriedly, wringing her hands along the staff of the scythe.

Unfortunately, all Deidara could offer as a reply was "Duck!" as he forced her down to the ground to avoid another attack of the black threads. On instinct, she rolled over and swung the three blades up to meet the cords, and it sliced cleanly through them all. Kakuzu gave a surprised shout, and threads rained down on them both. One of them connected with her impromptu collar, and it came off of her neck, slithering away with the rest of the cables. She gasped, relieved, and ignored the bruises it left. "G-Go see what Kabuto wanted!"

And she was gone, leaving Deidara alone and wondering when she had gotten so...tough. "Sure thing, yeah..." He rolled onto his feet. Sidestepping a pissed Akatsuki member, he darted over toward the injured, annoyed medic. "What did you want?" The blonde asked rudely with a scowl. "I don't have much time to spare—"

"Heal my arm. Just one. I can do the rest, then." Kabuto hissed at him, nodding down to his limp arms. The silver-haired shinobi glared up at Deidara with his dark eyes, and the blonde was half-tempted to refuse. (He barely knew any medical jutsus, anyway.) But still, they were outnumbered without it, never mind the fact that two of his opponents were Akatsuki.

"Fine, yeah." With an annoyed roll of his eye, which he made sure the medic-nin caught, he started seals. "What's wrong?"

"Only a few broken bones. Two broken bones, one fracture, and I think a few torn muscles. Mostly near the elbow, if you're going to heal my right arm." He informed him, matter-of-factly. Deidara grunted, and proceeded to heal him as best as his limited skills would allow. At least he could move his arm again.

"There—" At that moment, however, Kabuto back flipped just as Kakuzu's arm shot forward again, going right through Deidara's chest. The shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke, and instead the missing Iwa-nin leapt down from the nearest tree and made signs as he ran toward the giant.

Kakuzu visibly braced himself for an attack, probably one of taijutsu, but Deidara finished his

seals and the minute bird nestled in his hair grew into a massive clay creation. With one sweep of its wing it knocked a surprised Akatsuki member aside, as a cheerful explosives user hopped onto its foot. The bird took to the skies and he clambered onto its back. From here it would just be a matter of playing sniper.

-.-.-

Hinata had left Deidara with the intent of fighting the two bickering over him herself. She thought that Kabuto had called her to try to heal him, so he could join in this desperate battle royale, and hoped that it was true. They needed help, and that was when two of their enemies were already tied up with each other.

The heiress somehow had managed to get within range of attack without either Hidan or the other noticing. Without further thought, she swung the large scythe around, beheading them both.

She was shocked when the water-user (she had noticed that he had turned to water temporarily after she had used her gravity-warping jutsu) separated from his head with a loud splash, and turned into water. Hidan, on the other hand, was decapitated easily and his head rolled to a stop a few feet off. She forced herself not to look at it, or at all the blood.

She was even more shocked, however, when the water reformed itself, calling itself back into the shape of the man before the attack. His features became more defined, until finally, he was whole and unharmed again in front of her. Hinata couldn't help but tremble slightly; now what was she supposed to do?

But the greatest shock was when Hidan's severed head started talking.

"You bitch! No one decapitates a disciple of Jashin-sama! He will feast on your soul, you fucking heathen!" The pale-haired head started shouting at her. Both Hinata and the other ninja stared at it for a long while, while he continued to rant at the top of his no-longer-connected lungs. "He will take his payment in your blood! You have no right to inflict such pain on a Jashinist!"

"That's... interesting." The fanged shinobi stated in a somewhat awed voice. (*As if reforming yourself from water was something you see every day...* her mind retorted, but her body stayed silent.) "So then, miss 'heathen', shall we—hey!" Hinata blinked as she met his eyes, and apparently he recognized the active Byakugan. "You're a Hyuuga!" That answered that question.

The pale-eyed kunoichi replied by cutting him through the middle with the borrowed scythe. Once again, he melted into water, and once again, it didn't hurt him. But this time, he had a wide grin on his face as he leaned forward toward her. "I think I get it now."

She didn't dare ask what he understood suddenly, and instead turned and fled. Or rather, she turned, took two steps, and ran into Kabuto. The light-haired Oto-nin was fully healed, not a scratch on him, just a testament to his healing prowess. (Though, granted, his shirt was still torn and bloody, and a healing of that magnitude had to have consumed a great deal of chakra.) "K-Kabuto-kun!"

"Hinata, you should be—look out!" Kabuto pushed her down and she felt something brush over the top of her head. She didn't have to have her Byakugan to know that the Kiri-nin had stolen Hidan's scythe, and it narrowly missed beheading her.

"I could get used to this weapon." He said conversationally, weighing it in his hands. From his

stance and handling, her shinobi training told her that this man was a swordsman.

But then... where's his sword? she glanced around again with her bloodline limit, checking if there were any traps involving the missing sword. None she could spot, and that only meant that it would have to wait to be answered.

"Come here, you little Hyuuga princess. I owe you for those— ...ah." He cut himself off, and the expression on his face was such raw surprise, and even a little fear, that Hinata had to turn and look at it with her own eyes. The supposed swordsman's eyes were on Kabuto. Likewise, Kabuto was staring up at him, only with a smirk. "...Kabuto... you're here...?"

"Yes, I am. Surely that isn't a problem?" The Oto-nin replied. His tone was innocent, but his voice was icy. "Hinata-chan, I would like you to meet an experiment of mine and Orochimaru's. I'm sure you have already discovered a few of the abilities I gave to him." Kabuto turned his head toward her, but his eyes never left the shocked eyes of the other. "This is Houzuki Suigetsu."

At the sound of his name, the man, Suigetsu, straightened up again and resumed his predatory expression. "Nice to know you remember me, Kabuto. I remember you, too. And do you remember what I promised I would do to you once I got out...?" He chuckled darkly, hefting the stolen scythe once more. Kabuto wasn't fazed.

Hinata, on the other hand, had seen what that scythe had done—it *cut through Hidan's neck like butter*, she thought morbidly—and was nervously aware that the only thing standing between Suigetsu and his bloody goal was her.

It was an odd mixture of luck and misfortune that saved her from the Kiri-nin's assault. Of course, having a headless body tackle you probably would turn into nightmare fodder for the next few weeks. "No, you fucktard, wrong way! QUIT GROPING THE BITCH AND COME PICK ME UP!" Hinata flailed under the sudden weight, blushing at the shouted words, and started closing every chakra hole she could reach with her *Juuken*.

The body was soon just so much limp muscle, and she rolled it off of her, panting slightly from exertion and the fact that a *headless body* had just attacked her. Hidan's head was now throwing a complete tantrum at the lack of moving body, and was screeching at Kakuzu to come fix it. The Akatsuki member getting screeched at was too busy, however, and ignored him.

He and Deidara—who was flying above them on the largest clay bird she had ever seen—were exchanging sniper attacks from afar. The Iwa-nin would throw down a few exploding dolls, and likewise Kakuzu would fire upward a few strong, long-range jutsus. With her Byakugan active, she saw that he only had three hearts, and apparently that impaired his ninjutsu collection; she saw no more earth or lightning jutsus from the man. (But he didn't have any trouble trying to roast half the forest with a massive fire attack.)

Hinata briefly debated on whether or not to try her hand at a sneak attack, but regretfully decided that Deidara wasn't in any immediate danger. She, on the other hand, was. Suigetsu was advancing upon her, scythe at the ready (Hidan shrieking for its return in the background), and Kabuto lay a few feet off, trying to heal a deep cut in his side. "Come here, girlie. I want to repay you." The Kiri-nin laughed, and swung his arms back for a strike.

She didn't have time to block, or dodge. The navy-haired kunoichi could only watch in horror as the three blades descended down on her, coming to slice open her stomach, and wrench upward into her chest, piercing her lungs and destroying her innards and—a loud, metallic clang filled the air.

Neji was standing in front of her.

He was holding the scythe at bay with a pair of kunai, slowly loosing ground (and backing into her), but holding Suigetsu back nonetheless. His brown hair fell loosely around his shoulders, most of it having fallen out of his ponytail. "N-Neji... niisan..." the heiress breathed, letting loose the breath she hadn't been aware she had been holding.

"Hinata-sama, run. Sasuke is—" Her protector was cut off as his opponent swung his leg up to kick his side—with surprising strength. Hinata stepped forward to attack, most likely with the best *Hakke Rokujuuyon Sho* she could muster with the given situation. But Neji purposely tripped her, dragging her down onto the ground as Suigetsu aimed a punch at the spot her head had been moments before. She found herself staring into her cousin's white eyes, Byakugan active as well. "Go."

She didn't dare disobey him when he used that tone of voice. The kunoichi scrambled to her feet, hearing another metal-on-metal clang behind her. Hinata sprinted toward the forest, heart beating madly in her chest. It wasn't from the adrenaline, either... Neji, that look in his eyes, and once again he had saved her...

Her resolve in herself, in this self-appointed mission, weakened drastically. The Hyuuga sagged against the nearest tree, panting. No rest for the wicked, however, as Kakuzu almost literally stumbled upon her. Judging from the explosion that followed him, she surmised that Deidara had chased him into the cover of the trees with his sniper-playing. Fearful white eyes met surprised green ones, and the two stared at each other for a moment.

Then Kakuzu reached forward toward her, narrowing his strange eyes in a glare. But again, fate intervened, in the form of Itachi's younger brother.

Sasuke slashed down with his katana, severing the Akatsuki member's arm cleanly. The man snarled and recoiled his stump of an arm, but several of his black cords leaked out of his body, reattaching themselves to the other half of his limb. Hinata watched in a horrified fascination; *he can reattach limbs...*

"Let's go!" Sasuke grabbed her wrist roughly, and half-dragged, half-led her away from him at a dead run. She hurried along after him, dodging trees, branches and bushes, listening hard for any signs of pursuit. Her mind was reeling from this whole thing—*first Akatsuki, Deidara-kun was covered in blood, Kabuto-kun was hurt... then Suigetsu, and his water... then Neji-niisan and Sasuke*—and it was getting close to a complete mental shutdown. (Incidentally, that state of temporary mental death was ideal for shinobi. It allowed them to operate in top form, with no petty emotions or sidetracking thoughts to distract them from fighting.)

And the thing that pushed Hinata over the edge was when the Uchiha looked back at her.

Days of nightmares, three days of genjutsu torture, and one fight against his older brother came rushing back to her. All of the above with red eyes—Sharingan eyes. Sasuke, killing her mercilessly. Naruto, turning into a horrible red-eyed monster. Neji, plunging the sword into her skull. Itachi, watching her with flat satisfaction. Horrible nightmares, keeping her awake, sapping her strength and her sanity in every waking moment. Everything with red eyes. The same red eyes that were looking at her now.

Hinata stopped dead, and blinked once. Her Byakugan faded out, replaced by her normal ashen eyes. Sasuke halted as well, turning to look at her—with the same red eyes. She screamed shrilly, wrenched her wrist out of his grasp, and bolted. The heiress was still screaming when Kakuzu found her, and was still going at it at the top of her lungs when he picked her up by the back of her

jacket. She planned on screaming for awhile, too; until the red eyes left her alone and she could get that horrible genjutsu out of her mind.

The giant of a shinobi glared dully at her, from between his hitai-ate at his mask. His bright green eyes studied her for a moment, while she was still shrieking and flailing in his iron grasp. Hinata had the vague sensation of her foot connecting with his arm and body several times, but it was a detached sensation, and didn't make a very large impact on her panicking mental state.

What made it worse was that Sasuke had just run back, apparently to try to help her, unaware that he was (accidentally) the cause of her breakdown in the first place. "Let her go...!" She heard the Uchiha demand, with the same detached sense of hearing. Her own voice was beginning to grow hoarse, already, but she still continued her scream of terror.

But, as every shinobi knows, terror, or fear in general, brings on adrenaline. And adrenaline brings out all that chakra that normally lies dormant in a ninja's body, bringing it out from every nook and cranny of their body, and gives it to them to continue to operate in their heightened state.

With another shrill scream, Hinata heard her own barely understandable voice shout, "*Hakke Rokujuuyon Sho!*" Kakuzu winced from the proximity of her mouth to his ear, but the attack hit him like a ton of bricks. (Once again proving that even the great Akatsuki weren't immune to the chakra-blocking attacks of the Hyuuga clan.)

Then she turned and fled from Sasuke.

She met Hidan on the way, but he—surprisingly—dodged out of *her* way, as well as Sasuke's a step behind. Suigetsu, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as lenient with letting her go by unharmed. Hinata, still shrieking, ducked under the scythe's arc. She also slid under Neji's attack—like he knew she would—and continued her desperate flee from the red eyes of the Uchiha. Her cousin shouted something, but she couldn't hear him over her own voice.

Deidara also took a keen interest in her screams.

-.-.-

He heard her screaming when she first started, and thought that Hidan had put her under the same genjutsu he'd used on him. Deidara feared for her, genuinely was *scared* for her welfare, and tried to pick out her light jacket from between the trees from his vantage point atop his bird. He couldn't see anything, even with his scope.

But Hidan was still incapacitated (*and decapitated*, he thought with a morbid amusement), and was shouting at his headless body to come pick him up and take him to Kakuzu. The Akatsuki member in question was also nowhere to be found, and it only unsettled the blonde more. Deidara continued to scour the area for any sign of his partner-though his sharp eyesight came across something far more unpleasant instead.

Neji was there, engaging the Kiri-nin in a rather violent tussle. The latter had Hidan's scythe, and was slashing madly away with it like a man possessed. Kabuto was nowhere to be seen, either.

But as Neji was there, he could safely assume that Sasuke was, as well. This was getting to be a bit too crowded for his tastes, and Deidara thought of trying to retreat. (But still, his enemies seemed to be fighting each other, too, so that was a plus.)

Then his Hyuuga partner, whose screams were still assaulting his eardrums and making his heart wrench unexpectedly, burst out of the trees like a demon was on her heels. And as far as he was concerned, there was; Uchiha Sasuke was tailing her. The pair ran straight into the Kiri-nin and the Hyuuga's fight, and Deidara was about to call out to her to warn her of the erratic scything attacks.

But the kunoichi ducked easily under the first attack, and instinctively dodged as her clan-mate struck over her hunched back, and scored a direct hit on the other's chest. Deidara almost cheered aloud; he could at least appreciate a good attack, even if it wasn't art, or wasn't his.

Hidan had now disappeared as well. The Kiri-nin struggled backward, out of the Hyuuga's range, and fled into the forest's dense trees as well. Neji was only a step behind.

But then, the worst players reappeared on the playing field. Kabuto sailed out of the trees, Kakuzu's semi-detachable hand gripping his shirt and pushing him backward. The Akatsuki member followed them quickly, forming seals with his other hand. Their team's medic got free of his grasp, and was backpedaling desperately to stay out of it, the corded hand following him backward.

"Bya-chan!" Deidara had his behemoth-bird float down, ruffling the grass below with its wing beats. The dark-haired, screaming kunoichi turned and looked at him, terror written in her eyes. She ran toward him, and latched onto his outstretched hand like a lifeline. But then Sasuke, desperate not to let her get away *again*, threw his weight at her feet (for they were rapidly gaining altitude again). The sudden shift in balance caused the two to be torn apart, and she landed in a heap with the Uchiha below.

"Neji!" Sasuke yelled, trying to keep her still below him. Without a question, Neji appeared out of the forest, took a running start, and leapt deftly onto the bird with Deidara. Alarmed, he had the bird shoot into the sky, trying to throw him off before this could escalate.

But a determined Konoha-nin would not be shaken so easily.

He advanced slowly, keeping his balance on the moving clay, and finally lunged at the blonde. Deidara felt his shoulder go numb from the *Juuken* strike, and had to keep his mind on the task at hand if he wanted to retain any fighting ability. (Plus, he was *tired* of having his birds explode *every single time* he got attacked by an angry enough Hyuuga.)

He could read Neji's intentions quite easily, and only after a few strikes. He was quite obviously intent on keeping this fight close-range, to lock them into only taijutsu and short-range jutsus—which, as far as his opponent knew, he had little to none of. But there was one thing the supposed genius jounin hadn't took into consideration.

Bombs could be used in close range combat as well.

--.-

Hinata had the wind knocked out of her from the impact on the ground and a rather heavy Uchiha falling on top of her didn't help much. Her relentless scream only came out as a weak hiss of air, as she desperately tried to draw more oxygen into her lungs. (Which, while screaming at the same time, is quite difficult to do.) But still, shinobi instincts kicked back in, and the heiress tried to shove Sasuke off of her and get away from him.

He still had the Sharingan.

"H-Hinata! Hold still, damn it!" He pinned her wrists to her sides, or at least tried to. He managed to hold one hand still, but then the other came up and smacked him—hard—across the face. Now visibly angry, Sasuke sat on her waist, ignoring her flailing hands, and started forming seals.

She recognized them immediately. It was for a basic genjutsu, one that most academy students had to learn at one point or another. A simple sleep jutsu, but a rather strong one at that. And she wasn't going to let him finish signing. Hinata took a deep, grateful breath, ignoring the weight, and reactivated her Byakugan. She also had to hold down a scream as she locked eyes with his crimson ones.

Rather than building up and wasting chakra to disrupt his own chakra system, she did a much more natural thing. And she had to admit, it made her feel a little bit of satisfaction as she punched Sasuke as hard as she could in the stomach. He doubled over with a choked grunt, and Hinata wriggled out from under him, fleeing once more. Like a good shinobi, however, he was fast on her trail.

But a 'newcomer' stepped into their path. Or rather, it was Hidan, head reattached. (Apparently sewed back on by some of Kakuzu's threads... Hinata shuddered.) He held out his arm—scythe back in his own hands—and unfortunately, the Hyuuga couldn't stop soon enough. His wrist caught her under the chin, knocking the wind out of her chest and she did an awkward sort of flip to land on the ground. Hidan must've attacked Sasuke as well; at any rate, she heard the familiar sound of metal-on-metal, though they were both currently in her blind spot.

Suigetsu wasn't one to waste an opportunity, evidently. The Kiri-nin stealthily sneaked over, kunai drawn and that predatory grin still on his face. But, as he was about to find out, Hinata wasn't one to waste an opportunity, either. Just as he threw the kunai, aimed at Hidan's head, she jumped to her feet. The Akatsuki member was surprised by the attack, but easily caught the kunai—after it had cut his cheek. "Why you—" Then the heiress tackled his hand, wrenching the scythe out of his grip and stealing it once more. "Bitch!"

She ran for it, and luck was with her. Suigetsu had unfortunately timed his second kunai right after she stole the weapon—so Hidan's rage was turned on him, instead. But that also left Sasuke free as the Akatsuki shinobi advanced on the fanged one.

"Hinata! Get back here, you foolish girl!" Sasuke shouted in irritation. She saw with her Byakugan him unsheathe his katana, and sped up. She had no choice but to turn and meet his blade with her own (stolen) ones.

He blocked the sickle with a kunai, something she wasn't expecting. The Uchiha genius then brought his sword up to meet her—apparently he was under orders to take her, and under force if necessary. She jumped backwards, the tip of the blade barely catching the edge of her jacket and slicing it open.

Sasuke swore under his breath as the scythe's three blades came back at him, and had to block with both kunai and katana in both hands.

With her Byakugan, Hinata noticed that Kabuto was in trouble as well, running from a pissed-looking Kakuzu and his corks. No doubt he didn't have any wish to be a victim of them again. But the (*missing?* she couldn't help but ask herself) Konoha chuunin had no time to help; after all, a chuunin versus a jounin is hardly a fair fight.

Sasuke finally found an opening in her erratic assault, and she had a split second to try to dodge or

block. Instincts had her whip out the tiny clay bird in her kunai pouch, and shoved it in his face.

The Uchiha froze instantly. She formed the seals for enlarging it, preferring to run rather than continue fighting, and predictably he jumped back several paces. He thought she was going to detonate it. Instead, the bird grew large enough to accommodate her weight in a puff of nin-smoke, and stretched its wings experimentally. Sasuke scowled and tried to jump at them, but the Hyuuga threw the scythe at him as she hauled herself up. They were airborne before he could stop them.

Unfortunately, Suigetsu really *was* a big opportunist. Somehow managing to get away from Hidan long enough to ambush Sasuke, he re-stole the scythe. (It appeared to be in high demand.) Without wasting any further time, using his forward momentum from a jump, the Kiri-nin chucked the weapon at her and her bird with as much force as he could muster.

Apparently, it was a lot of force. Hinata could've sworn she had seen his muscles *grow* with the effort of throwing the scythe. But as it was, the blades sliced cleanly and easily through the four-foot-thick neck of the bird, and she found herself coming back down to meet the ground—and those horrible red eyes—again.

But again, the heiress was negatively surprised. Just as the bird was detonating, mere yards from the grass, an alarmed Sasuke and a furious Hidan, Suigetsu jumped up and caught her around the waist. In a fluid, single motion, he threw her over his shoulder and hit the ground at a run. Miraculously, he managed to catch the scythe as it came back down to earth, too.

Hinata tried to kick or punch him, but to no avail. The man was slim, but he was built like a rock. So, for the second time in less than a month, the Hyuuga's heir found herself being kidnapped by a foreign ninja.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Oh noes! Hinata's been kidnapped again! By Suigetsu, the mysterious ex-experiment of Kabuto and Orochimaru's! Whatever will she do? More importantly, how will Deidara and Kabuto work together long enough to rescue her? Or will Neji and Sasuke beat them to it? And what does Suigetsu want with her, anyway?

The Final Countdown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In a rather skillful demonstration of the acrobatics someone could only learn under a teacher like Maito Gai, Neji bent backwards at the waist, ducking under the hand holding a clay bird as it thrust over him. But Deidara was just as clever as him, and had a second bird. The irritating blonde drove that one down in his other arm toward the Hyuuga's stomach. Neji continued showing off his sensei's prowess, flipping his legs up, doing a temporary handstand, and then gracefully spinning over and landing on his feet again.

But the bombs were not spent.

Neji raced toward the giant bird's wing, away from the Iwa-nin. He jumped off, but grabbed the edge of the square wing and used it to swing underneath its body. The brunette jounin caught himself on one of the bird's large feet. But he didn't stop there; he used his forward momentum to leap to the other foot, then jump up onto the other side.

He was behind Deidara now, and had gotten there surprisingly and in less than a few seconds. One didn't train with Maito Gai and Rock Lee without learning some pretty amazing things. Neji wasn't going to waste his advantage, either, and wanted to show off another one of those amazing things he'd learned from the taijutsu experts. He darted toward his opponent, just as he turned around.

Neji ducked down, not purposely dodging anything. Then he shifted his weight to his hands and kicked upward with as much power as he could manage, shouting, "*Konoha Senpu!*" He heard Deidara's teeth click together as his foot made contact with his chin, and he went flying. Neji followed him, using Lee's signature *Kage Buyou* to follow him, then finally deviated from his teammate's taijutsu. "*Hakke Rokujuuyon Sho!*" Byakugan blazing, hands moving faster than lightning, Deidara's tenketsu points were sealed.

And only when they both landed (Neji gracefully on his feet, Deidara with a thud) did he remember that, from past experience, when the Iwa-nin's chakra was cut off, his bombs detonated by default. And they were both on the largest clay creation he had seen yet.

The prodigy almost gasped in relief when the body disappeared in a puff of smoke.

He glared around uneasily for any signs of his chakra, but nothing was in sight. Neji took a step to his left, toward the center of the bird's back, and turned his head, moving his blind spot. Deidara became visible, perched on one of the thick tail feathers, crouched down. He had a rather curious expression on his face, as if he had just been given a cookie and didn't know what to do with it.

Neji paled as he realized what his movement—and careless look of surprise—did. Deidara's mouth broke into a broad, evil grin, and his dark-rimmed eye narrowed. "...You have a blind spot, don't you, yeah...?"

-.-.-

It was night before they stopped. Hinata was spent. The Akatsuki members had attacked just after

dawn, and she had been fighting for several hours before getting kidnapped. And even then, being carried bent over someone's shoulder, head and feet hanging down and messing up her blood (and chakra) circulation wasn't a walk in the park, either.

But the real test hadn't even begun. She had been kicking at the same spot the whole time, and was positive she had broken at least one rib. Her (newest) kidnapper, Suigetsu, set her down, and not a moment later, she was bound. He was careful.

The Hyuuga just glared at him, her pale eyes glinting in the rising moon. He merely grinned in return, and set about fixing that broken rib. (The Kiri-nin took a long drink from his bottle, paused for a moment, and then deemed it apparently healed. She didn't want to know what that meant about his body.)

"So. What's your name, eh?" He sat down, leaning his forearms against the scythe resting on his knees. Hinata didn't answer, and instead warily watched the weapon. She knew what it could do, and what he had wanted to do to her with it.

But... if he kidnapped me, he must not want to just kill me... right...? she thought hopefully, keeping her mouth shut. He waited patiently, staying as still as her, for her reply. And still she gave none. The silence stretched on, and curse the gods, Hinata was starting to get uneasy with it. Yes, she was a quiet, shy girl, but that didn't mean that she could keep quiet under the pressure of an uncomfortable silence! She squirmed a bit, testing the ropes binding her arms, and tried to keep her mind on actually acting like a ninja instead of chatting with the enemy. (Because she knew how well that went last time. Yes, Deidara was nice to her, and funny, and protective...but now, away from him and in the presence of another enemy, she couldn't help but wonder if it really was the Stockholm Syndrome. Or maybe her liking of loud blondes.)

But even that only lasted so long; she was tied up good and tight. She couldn't see any way out of the ropes without access to either hand signs or a kunai. Suigetsu was still staring at her intently, and that only added to her discomfort. A small, almost inaudible (even to shinobi) whimpering sound escaped her, and unfortunately, she wasn't aware her mental turmoil had been given away with the squeak.

Suigetsu, however, must have had excellent hearing. With a surprising motion, he flipped the stolen scythe off of his legs, the blades burying themselves in a large stone a few mere feet away. Hinata's eyes snapped over to look at it, mistaking the weapon's sudden movement for an attack. When she returned her gaze to the front and center, Suigetsu's face was approximately two inches from her own.

"Do I make you nervous?" He asked seriously. The predatory grin returned, and her white eyes flicked downward, realizing just how sharp those teeth probably were. Sharp enough to rip out her throat if needed, most likely. She also felt that his question was answered easily by that glance and the gulp following. "I see. Good."

He patted her cheek, and she resisted the urge to snort. (If only for the fact that Konoha kunoichi do *not* snort, especially not the Hyuuga clan's heir.) So instead, she turned her head away from him, closed her eyes, and kept her mouth glued shut. Not the most mature way of dealing with things, but whatever worked.

"What's your connection to him?" Her eyelids flickered, wanting to open to give him an incredulous look, but she remained rigid and unmoving. The dark-haired chuunin could *hear* his smile, though, but whether he was genuinely amused or smiling constantly was some sort of quirk of his, she couldn't tell. (Plus, even if she wanted to, she didn't know how to answer his question. What *was* Deidara to her?) "Are you siblings? Or are you married?"

Um... he's not talking about Deidara-kun, is he...? she thought, and slit open an eye to look at him. His grin had turned upside down in a thoughtful frown, and one hand was tapping his chin. One of his pointed teeth was poking out of his mouth, resting on his bottom lip. She made an unintentional face at the sight.

"Hey, you have no room to talk, miss 'heathen'." He must've caught the expression, and she felt herself flush with guilt. Though he was a grade-a jerk, an enemy against her, Deidara, her cousin, Kabuto, and Konohagakure, and a stranger, she couldn't help it. Some habits just can't be broken, no matter how determined someone may be. "My teeth are a tradition for swordsman in Kirigakure. At least they look better than those freaky eyes of yours." Suigetsu almost looked like he was pouting, and Hinata could feel herself slipping into a sulk as well. Her eyes had always been a source of chagrin for her, no matter how useful they were.

"A-All Hyuuga have them..." She said ruefully, more to herself than him.

"Well, all Kiri swordsman have these." He retorted, baring his teeth in her face. She winced as they snapped shut a bit too close for comfort. "But you haven't answered my questions." The heiress mustered up her best glare and shut her mouth. Suigetsu gave her a flat look. "Don't make me go vampire on you to get the answers I need."

Hinata paled at the threat. "My name..." She could undoubtedly create a fake name, and undoubtedly he was expecting it. But he knew she was a Hyuuga, and he was a missing Kiri-nin, and he had been an experiment of Orochimaru's for a long time... so he wouldn't know she was the heiress. And if he thought it was a fake name, it was the perfect cover. "My-My name... is Hyuuga Hinata."

"Now we're getting somewhere." Suigetsu grinned, smug, at her. "Now. What is your connection to the other Hyuuga? What's his name?"

Oh. He meant Neji-niisan... how does he know niisan? she swallowed nervously. An alias for him wouldn't work, and she didn't dare give out such information about him so freely. She stayed quiet.

But again, the light-haired Kiri-nin stayed silent, waiting for her. She knew she would lose this battle, so she blurted out, "I'm not telling you."

-.-.-

The day had passed quickly. The fight hadn't. Moonlight was a tricky thing to fight in, especially in a forest. The leaves dappled the light and made it even harder to see. Even his hawk-eye was useless in moonlight. Deidara tilted his head upward and glared at the oval moon, for good measure. He and Kabuto were hidden (hopefully) effectively in a small grove of trees to the west of the clearing where the majority of the fight had taken place. Well, it had been a clearing, before he was forced to detonate that huge bird to get rid of the Hyuuga brat.

Kabuto leaned casually against one of the nearer trees, his knees drawn up to his chest and elbows resting on them. Deidara was on his stomach, trying to continue his sniping through the bushes, but his scope was acting rebellious and the ammo was currently singing mutely and pecking at invisible insects on the ground near his foot.

"If only we had Bya-chan, with her Byakugan... yeah..." With a defeated sigh, he rolled over onto

his back. He flinched when his shoulder moved; Neji's assault had dislocated it, and he had only hurriedly shoved it back into place with no mind of how it would affect his arms later on.

Deidara was a sorry mess of a shinobi, in other words. He was still covered in blood from that genjutsu, and he had consumed roughly a half dozen soldier pills to try to restore some of the missing blood. His shoulder and arm were stiff and sore, and were only stiffening up as time passed. His cheek stung from where he tried to gouge out his own eye, also compliments of that genjutsu. The blonde was covered in minor burns, of course, but that was just part of his job. He was much more worried about his hands. They were still cut, and slowly oozing blood (and saliva). He wouldn't be able to mold much clay—or perform many seals—in that state. Hand wounds were never good for him.

Kabuto, on the other hand, had been through worse than he. And yet the medic-nin sat smugly opposite him, pristinely free of wounds and practically *glowing* in the moonlight. (Granted, the fact that he had just as much blood and dirt covering him as Deidara, and he had eventually ditched his shirt because it was only so many rags after one of Kakuzu's attacks sort of hampered the 'pristine' vision, but Deidara still glared at him. He could've at least *offered* to heal his hands.)

"Neji-san will have his Byakugan active, no doubt. In fact, I would be rather surprised if he and Sasuke-kun *don't* know where everyone is right now." The Oto-nin said calmly, smirking in response to his teammate's glare. "You should probably be on guard, not laying around feeling sorry for yourself and lamenting the loss of Hinata-chan. We'll need to get out of *this* fight first, before we go off hunting for Suigetsu."

Deidara just sent his clay bird flying into Kabuto's face, his own reply to the smug summation of their situation. The medic tussled with the jutsu for several minutes, while Deidara looked on, until they both felt a spike of chakra behind them. Both shinobi froze, following the movement, sensing the attack as it neared. But any mediocre ninja could tell that that was a diversion.

A diversion turned attack.

Sasuke, *Chidori* crackling and chirping, cut through the underbrush like butter and thrust the attack toward Kabuto. At the last moment, the would-be victim jumped up, landing on Sasuke's shoulders and pushing him into the ground with a well-aimed kick. The *Chidori* hit the ground, and dust, rocks and dirt flew up all around them, creating a temporary smokescreen.

Deidara swore as he felt the chakra behind him, a bit too late. Neji's first *Juiken* strike just barely missed his neck, but the second hit him in the chest. "Damn—*Katsu!*" The bird streaked toward the Hyuuga, but Neji ducked, and it exploded behind him. The shockwave sent him tumbling into Deidara, though, and who in turn slammed into both Kabuto and Sasuke. The blonde felt something sharp and stingy—he only had to assume that by the tingling effect afterward that the *Chidori* had struck him somewhere—graze his side, and every breath he took hurt.

The four didn't even have time to sort themselves out before the Akatsuki members, alerted by the explosion, attacked. The whole clearing was enveloped in a large burst of fire, but that only lasted a moment before the Hyuuga's *Kaiten* redirected the force. (It also was quite useful for separating them—and separating him from his Uchiha partner.) Hidan responded with a shout and what appeared to be a pike. He and Neji exchanged close-combat blows, while Kakuzu perched on top of the highest tree above them and decided to play sniper.

Barely dodging some sort of arrow made of water, Deidara locked eyes with Kabuto for the briefest of moments. And with the smallest nod of his head possible, the explosives expert conveyed his plan. As much as he'd like to leave the jerk behind, he would need a medic after this battle, and he'd need help rescuing his kunoichi partner.

Using a *Doton* technique, he burrowed underground, comfortably listening while his clay clone above yelled, "*Katsu!*" The Iwa-nin dug around under the topsoil, feeling for Kabuto's chakra signature, counting down until the final explosion. This had better work; Deidara only had enough clay left for about two small bombs or another large one. He needed to learn to better prepare himself.

Finally, he picked out the Oto-nin's signature, and rapidly forming seals, created a hole above him. Kabuto fell down silently, landing on his feet like a cat. The hole sealed itself again, and Deidara estimated they had about ten seconds to get as far away as possible.

"What kind of jutsu is this?" Kabuto asked politely, watching as the Iwa-nin started burrowing away at the fastest pace he could manage.

"An Iwa one." Deidara replied irritably.

He felt Kabuto give him a look, but didn't say anything more. "...For a missing-nin, you seem to still have a lot of loyalty to Iwagakure." The medic said finally, a smirk in his voice. Deidara knew that question had been coming, if not from him than from the Hyuuga, for quite some time. But now was not the time, the place, or the person to talk this through with.

"So, yeah?" He snapped, instead. He felt Kabuto shrug behind him, and they continued digging in silence. The Iwa-nin paused, estimating how far they had come. The ground around them shook, rather feebly, so he guessed at least a few kilometers. "Which way was that Kiri-nin going with Bya-chan?"

"In this direction." The silver-haired shinobi replied mildly.

"Then we'll go two more kilometers and we'll surface. Easier to travel above ground, yeah." Deidara glanced upward at the dirt ceiling, then continued. It was pitch-black in the man-made tunnel, but true to his village, he knew exactly where all of the earth around him was. Like Konoha shinobi knew the forests, this was his turf. Well, not exactly, but at least pretty damn close to it.

"Above ground? Surely an Iwa-nin like yourself considers it easier to travel below ground... Unless this isn't quite your thing?" The smirk was back in his voice. Deidara scowled, and decided to ignore him. He missed his *real* partner already.

Bya-chan, I promise I'll never let you get kidnapped again. If only for the fact that I'm going to rip Kabuto's throat out, yeah, he vowed, the scowl turning into an evil grin. If only he could remember all of the seals to Hidan's genjutsu...

-.-.-

"He did it again." Sasuke noted dully, from his precarious perch on the tip of an evergreen. Neji sighed, and nodded. "At least we knew it was coming..."

"He seems to run from quite a lot of fights." The brunette added, narrowing his eyes. Of course the two Akatsuki members survived the blast, but his Byakugan didn't pick out any bodies—alive or otherwise. All that remained before them was a crater with a diameter of at least half a kilometer, smoking rubble, and a lot of charred trees. No sign of either the white-haired one or the masked one.

"But... you know, I think this time he could've continued fighting. He wasn't nearly as drained as the last time he used that jutsu." The Uchiha said thoughtfully, rubbing the back of his neck. He wiped a trickle of blood off of his chin, and then his hand returned to rubbing the back of his neck. The same spot that the seal was on, Neji surmised. "I think he's been training."

"Or developing better skills." He said. "He's been using his clay more efficiently, that's all. *And* he has a medic on his team now... Yakushi Kabuto."

"Why would Orochimaru's man go to his side? Doesn't he hold any sort of grudge? Deidara hates him, obviously, so why stay...?" Sasuke mused, absently continuing rubbing his shoulder. His eyes were their normal coal color, but Neji knew that he used the Sharingan at least once in that fight. That seal, whatever it was, needed to be taken care of.

"My cousin was protecting him. During the first chuunin exams, he healed her, and he possibly saved her life. She may have felt that she should repay that debt." The Hyuuga prodigy replied absently. "He needed someplace where he would be protected while he sorted out his priorities and skills, and reorganized his life. Kabuto may have been on his way to Konoha, and heard that Hinata-sama had been kidnapped... and she always was kind. She would have been his best bet for temporary safety."

"But why didn't Deidara kill him on sight?" Sasuke asked, eyes shifting over to glance at his partner. "Even Kabuto wouldn't have stood a chance against someone who killed a Sannin..."

"...He may have had a bargaining chip. Or perhaps he has someone else, pulling strings for him. A spy would have had many connections." Neji stood up, and shrugged. "But Kabuto isn't our main concern. We've assumed that Deidara's test to be accepted into the Akatsuki is to fight all of its members. He's already fought at least five; he's fought and killed Orochimaru. We're running out of time for this to work." He narrowed his eyes in Sasuke's direction, daring him to voice his opinion aloud.

The Uchiha didn't directly take the bait. "Yes, we have to make sure to pin him down, rescue your darling cousin, and kill him before he gets into the Akatsuki." He rolled his eyes, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "Once we rescue Hinata, you *know* we need information from her. She's *seen* Itachi... not to mention what she may have learned about other things."

"I'm sure Hinata-sama will be willing to give up anything she's learned." It was Neji's turn to roll his eyes. "...Which direction was the Kiri-nin traveling last? Deidara and Kabuto will most likely be going in the same direction."

"That way." Sasuke sighed, and pointed exactly in front of them. "I'd guess he's heading for another river."

"Yes..."

The two geniuses leapt down from the higher branches to lower ones, and set off to once again rescue the Hyuuga heiress from a malevolent force.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Ooh, things are heating up! Our four favorite guys are all closing in on an oblivious Suigetsu and Hinata. But this Kiri-nin isn't stupid; he's learned the price

of a good bargaining chip, and especially one that two different sides want. He doesn't want to give up the princess that easily! But which side does he want to bargain with? What's his goal? And will Hinata last, if he needs information that badly? More importantly, how long will Deidara and Kabuto last before they start attacking each other?

Why Can't There Be A Compromise?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata gasped for air. She couldn't breathe. Her breath came out in shrieks and whimpers, almost choking on the tears rolling down her cheeks. She couldn't take it much longer... but she had to! She had promised herself not to give up any more information if it killed her! (But it just might...) The kunoichi couldn't catch her breath, and Suigetsu wasn't letting up on the torture...

H-He must want this information badly...! her mind latched onto that thought, and clung to it for dear life. Her determination increased, but at the same time cracked with another one of the Kiri-nin's assaults. Hinata desperately tried to squirm away, but she was still bound, and couldn't have moved anyway with Suigetsu hovering over her like this. It was probably just instinct; get away from the source of the problem.

Because Suigetsu had found out that she was ticklish.

Hinata howled with laughter as he prodded her in her side again. She was already in a giggling fit from the attack on her feet, and she couldn't catch her breath. She was laughing too hard. The heiress could only hope that he didn't find out that her neck was ticklish as well...

"Are you going to tell me what I need to know, now?" The Kiri-nin asked, grinning. He grabbed one of her bare feet, tickling it as her other leg tried to push him away in vain. She barely managed to shake her head as she tried to get her foot away. "I can resort to more painful measures if need be. I just want to, you know, go easy on you. You're a girl, and you look like you've already had a tough time of things, miss 'heathen'. So come on, it's not village-threatening information I need. Just a few tidbits."

"Ahh—n-no!" She giggled, biting her lip to try to stop. He just shrugged, and started tickling her foot again. The kunoichi was helpless when it came to this type of onslaught. Pain she could deal with, but not this type! (Plus, shinobi can't mold chakra very well when laughing. Anyone can't do anything very well when laughing, though.)

"What's his name?" He repeated himself, dragging his finger lightly against the sole of her foot. Hinata whimpered, squirmed, and said nothing, while screwing up her face to try to hold back the giggles. "Fine, if you want to protect *him*... What about the Uchiha? I thought they all died. What's his name? Why were you attacking him?"

Her cousin, she could protect... but Sasuke? She had never been fond of the boy (unlike every other girl her age), and he was cold and rude, but would she willingly betray information about him? Especially when she *was* trying to hack him to bits just hours earlier? Plus, surely he wouldn't blame her if she gave into this kind of torture.

"S-Sasuke!" Hinata finally yelped, cringing. She panted desperately for air as Suigetsu finally released her foot, giving her a rest. "Hi-His name is Uchiha... Sasuke..."

"...Sasuke?" His dark-rimmed eyes widened, and she narrowed her own in response. Did he know Sasuke? And if so, from where? (She knew, vaguely, about a rather traumatic mission to the Mist they had undergone in their genin days... but was it connected? Sakura had alluded to the fact that pretty much everyone involved had died.) But soon, Suigetsu's normal slightly maniacal expression—and grin—was back. If anything, he looked more smug than usual. "So... Sasuke-kun, eh?"

Interesting... kukuku..." Hinata had the feeling that he was mocking something, but the laugh just made her wince.

"Now then." His normal voice was back, as was the normal grin. "Uchiha Sasuke and some unnamed Hyuuga boy are after you. I have no knowledge of their motives, only partial knowledge of their skills, and they're undeniably homing in on me right now."

"So... wh-what do you want with me...?" She asked nervously, frowning slightly. Suigetsu eyed her for a moment, his face unreadable.

"At the same time, Deidara and Kabuto are undoubtedly closing in on both of us right now." He ignored her question, and squatted down beside her to look her in the white eyes. "What makes you so special to have such special people following you? And more importantly, how much are they willing to give to get you back?"

-.-.-

"You're limping."

"No I'm not."

"Yes, you are. I'm a medic. I know a limp."

"It's nothing. Leave me alone, yeah."

Kabuto frowned, but said nothing more. Ignoring injuries in the middle of battle was one thing, but outside of a fight? That was just stupid. But it was his body, and if Deidara wanted to act stupid, the Oto-nin wasn't going to stop him. It would probably be easier for all of them if he did die from battle wounds.

They both halted at the edge of the tree line. Before them lay nothing but stone and rock. Deidara's face was pale, and it confirmed Kabuto's question. This was the border into the Land of Earth. As a missing Iwa-nin, no doubt this would be deadly territory to stray into.

Did Suigetsu come this way on purpose...? He wondered, turning his head back out to the expanse of rocks.

But then, they spotted something that both quelled Deidara's fears, and was rather unnerving. On the horizon, on a rather large cliff, was the Kiri-nin. His dark outfit allowed him some camouflage in the barren landscape, but his hair gave him away. Beside him was a barely discernable Hinata. "There—"

"I see them, yeah." The ex-Iwa-nin interrupted, narrowing his eye. He brushed his bangs out of his face, and Kabuto noticed the scope affixed to his other eye for the first time. "He has Hidan's scythe propped up against a rock beside him. Bya-chan is bound, but appears unharmed. They're approximately two or three kilometers into Earth territory. We shouldn't have any problems with Iwa shinobi... yeah..."

"Then shall we?" Kabuto made an after-you gesture, to which Deidara irritably flipped him off. Then both missing-nin started toward their target.

The Kiri-nin didn't do anything as they neared, and he must have spotted them. Kabuto narrowed his eyes; Suigetsu must want to barter for the kunoichi. But what did he want from them?

Deidara was starting to pull ahead of him, mostly because the medic was more unfamiliar with the rocky terrain and wasn't as surefooted on loose stones as the Iwa-nin seemed to be. The blonde darted and leapt from rock to rock like a mountain goat, whereas Kabuto maintained all the grace of a drunk penguin.

The explosives user was halfway up the cliff face before the medic got to the bottom of it. Neither did he wish to play Spiderman, so Kabuto set about looking for a more suitable way up. In his search, he spotted two more players to the game. Two dots were just emerging from the tree line, one dressed in dark colors, the other in a light top. His glasses flashed as he pushed them back up on his nose. *Interesting... Neji and Sasuke have already caught up. This will be interesting.*

-.-.-

"They're already there." Neji said uselessly. Sasuke grunted in reply. The Hyuuga genius started the seals for a *Shunshin*, intending to at least make it to the base of the cliff before things got out of hand. He couldn't afford to let Hinata get kidnapped *again*, if only for the sake of his pride. Not to mention what it'd do to other troublesome emotions.

He disappeared in a puff of nin-smoke, sprinting toward the cliff. Not a second later, he reappeared at the bottom, glaring up as Deidara's foot disappeared over the top. He fixed his chakra in his sandals, and took a running start at the stone, just as Sasuke appeared a step behind him.

It took him three tries (rocks came loose occasionally, and he was actually walking almost upside-down at one point), but finally he managed to step foot on the cliff's top. He didn't like the sight before him.

Deidara actually looked *bored*, sitting cross-legged on a rock and picking at his teeth (the ones in his hand, anyway). Between him and Neji, however, the Kiri-nin sat, perched on his own rock. He was squatted down with his knees out, the scythe resting across them almost lazily. Hinata was bound, though not gagged, and leaning against the rock below him. At his appearance, the fanged shinobi looked up and offered a smile. "Is Sasuke-kun joining us, or is it just you?"

Neji wondered briefly how he knew Sasuke (or his name), and his eyes flickered down to meet his cousin's. Her eyes were wide, scared, and Byakugan-less. "Uchiha will be joining us." He said shortly, and on cue, the avenger appeared over the cliff's lip. Deidara's eye glanced over at him, narrowing slightly.

"So we're all here then. I wouldn't allow Kabuto on the mountain, anyway." He grinned carelessly, cocking his head to one side. Neji felt an irritated spike of chakra below them, and assumed Kabuto had heard that. The Hyuuga narrowed his white eyes, subtly activating his Byakugan. Nothing out of the ordinary. This scene was exactly as it seemed. "You and the Iwa-nin both want her." The Kiri-nin said suddenly, reopening his eyes.

"What do you want, yeah?" Said Iwa-nin asked rudely, frowning. Neji shot him a glare, but otherwise stayed silent. He could fight after he rescued his cousin.

"What do you have to offer?" He asked innocently. But then, he turned his attention to Sasuke. "I

know what the starting bid could be." The Uchiha narrowed his eyes, visibly suppressing the urge to activate his bloodline limit. The Kiri-nin shrugged, and unhooked one of the bottles on his belt, slurping loudly on it. Then, he offered it to Hinata. "Want some?"

"U-Um..." She squeaked, as surprised as anyone else at the suddenness and randomness of it. "No thank you..."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged again, and took another sip.

Sasuke snorted, and crossed his arms. "...What do you want from me?" His voice sounded less than pleased at being singled out first.

"You have some... interesting things about you. First off, I know about that Cursed Seal. You were Orochimaru's pet project. I wonder why that fell through." The self-proclaimed second coming chuckled at the expression on Sasuke's face. "I can't help much with that, but I know for a fact that our favorite little medic-nin down there can. I offer my services in subduing him and forcing him to do as you please."

"*What* do you want from *me*?" He snapped sourly.

The grin faltered for a moment in the face of such rudeness. "My priority?" He was all seriousness now, and he stepped down from the rock, to stand beside Hinata. "You know where Zabuzasempai's sword is, don't you?" Sasuke's silence was all the answer he needed. "I will trade this adorable little Hyuuga heathen for that information, and the promise that you won't attack me until I get that sword."

"We can't make any promises." Broke in Neji, sending a warning sign with his eyes toward his partner. The Uchiha just blinked.

"I wasn't expecting you to." The Kiri-nin wasn't fazed. He crouched down beside Hinata, slinging a skinny arm around her shoulders. "But you also can't expect me to just take that information, either. I'll need a bit of... insurance."

But apparently, and unfortunately, Deidara wasn't going to let that deal progress any further. "I'm joining the Akatsuki. That also has one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsman of the Mist. Hoshigaki Kisame. I can get that same information from him, yeah." He said carefully, standing up.

The Kiri-nin turned to regard him for several long moments. "No." He finally stated. "I don't want Kisame to know about me... quite yet. I have plans for him later on. But... the promise of a connection in the Akatsuki is tempting." He grinned once more, revealing his disturbingly sharpened teeth.

"I'll tell you where to find Zabuzas zanbato." Sasuke interrupted, glaring at the blonde.

"Alright! Now we're getting somewhere. But..." A water clone splashed into creation directly behind the Uchiha, wielding Hidan's stolen scythe. The blade was pressed against his neck. "I'm going to need that insurance we talked about. *You're* coming with me, Sasuke-kun." No one moved. Neji twitched toward his cousin, and instantly the real Kiri-nin's angular eyes were fixed on him. Deidara stayed frozen behind him. "No one move—and *don't you dare detonate that bomb*." Neji only then realized the clay spider on the ground before them. "I can kill them both in a moment. Sasuke-kun may be able to escape... but not poor Hinata here, eh?"

"You've got your payment. We'll tell you where the sword is. Let Hinata-sama and Sasuke both go." Neji's hand itched to go to his kunai pouch and peg the annoying Kiri-nin right between the

eyes, but that could possibly come later. Right now he needed to be careful. No doubt Sasuke could get away (it was a *water clone*, for gods' sake!), but Hinata couldn't. And while it wouldn't be very smart to kill his bargaining chip/hostage, it would be rather logical to injure her to show that he meant business.

-.-.-

Hinata swallowed. Suigetsu's teeth were pressed against her neck, one hand was pressing the tip of a kunai against her temple, and she didn't want to know what the other hand was threatening her with.

It was amazing how fast he had taken control of the situation again. Sasuke had just blasted a sizable hole in the stone, destroying the *Mizu Bunshin* at the same time. The attack had happened so quickly the heiress didn't even know what jutsu he had used, but it looked vaguely like a *Chidori*. Whatever it had been, Sasuke's face was visibly paler and he was panting. It took a lot out of him. She accidentally let a small whimper out, unfortunately only helping Suigetsu.

Hinata vowed that she would never again be kidnapped, a hostage, or a bargaining chip.

At this point, the kunoichi had several choices. The first and probably smartest being to just stay still, stay quiet, and let the guys figure this one out. But while she was meek, quiet and shy, she was *not* one to let others decide her fate. (Never mind the fact that she didn't completely want to go with her cousin. Deidara was still behind them, and her 'partner', after all.)

Neji had a pair of shuriken in his hand, arm poised for throwing. And while she didn't doubt her guardian's aim, she also didn't doubt the Kiri-nin's speed. The navy-haired girl resisted the urge to sigh at the raw desperation she couldn't help but feel. Her life, her choice (*Neji-niisan or Deidara-kun? Home, or this twisted self-appointed mission?*), and her loyalties were on the line, and she didn't have any say in the matter. What made this whole situation even more bizarre was that *Sasuke*, probably the person who she least liked (Suigetsu aside, of course) and least liked her, was handed the final decision.

But suddenly, Hinata blinked. She didn't dare move any more than that, but the most curious thing had just happened. The clay spider, the one Suigetsu had warned Deidara not to detonate, was behind her. She felt its legs brush her hand, and it seemed to be *untying the ropes*. The Hyuuga kept her face impassive and her body motionless. Maybe she'd get a bit of say in her own fate, if she played her cards right and Deidara didn't slip up. (But, awkwardly, she realized that she had complete faith in the Iwa-nin.)

"I recommend you don't try that again." Suigetsu said conversationally, his breath tickling her neck faintly. "Next time blood will be shed. Now. Tell me where Zabuza-sempai's sword is."

"On the Water side of the Great Naruto Bridge, two and a half kilometers east-northeast. It is in a clearing, marked by two crosses. It will be behind the left one." Sasuke said monotonously. His eyes were still black, and narrowed. Hinata was thankful that he hadn't activated the Sharingan. Once was enough, and she was just now trying to sort out what had happened.

"Hm. I think I know where that is." The shinobi grinned, and finally moved his head away from her neck. "But... I'll need an escort. It's going to be either you, Sasuke-kun, or little miss heathen here." He also dropped to kunai against her temple, slinging it casually around her shoulder.

Suigetsu turned to smile at her (she just stared at him), then returned his gaze to the Uchiha.

Hinata felt the small spider finally cut through the ropes. They loosened and sagged on her body, and Suigetsu noticed it immediately. Then all hell broke loose.

The freed kunoichi leapt away from the Kiri-nin's lunge, backpedaling as he scrambled after her. Sudden killing intent rolled over both of them, and Suigetsu must have realized that it was aimed at him. His hands flew together in seals, and before anyone could do anything further, a thick, blinding fog rolled onto the scene. Hinata kept moving, away from the spot she had last seen Suigetsu, and activated her Byakugan. Even the all-seeing eyes couldn't see much in the mist.

She realized that another aspect of the jutsu was hindering sight jutsus and bloodline limits when she backed into someone. Before she could scream, a hand clamped over her mouth, and the other arm wrapped itself around her stomach, pulling her against her assailant. Desperately, she flailed her legs, trying to either kick him (after all, she *was* the only kunoichi present) or make some sort of noise to alert someone who would save her.

Hinata tried to lick the hand covering her mouth (it had worked in academy exercises, but then again, she doubted her captor was as squeamish as Ino), but it stayed. That was, at least, until the hand licked her back. She went rigid, blushed heavily, and her white eyes widened.

I-I just li-licked Deidara's mouth...?! He licked me back! Is-Is this—eeeewww! her mind squealed, and she shuddered. *...Is he kissing me...?* If possible, she turned redder, but was thankful that in the thick fog no one could see her face.

"Shh." She heard Deidara's voice near her ear, and she tried to nod. As long as it wasn't Suigetsu holding her, she'd go with it.

Her rescuing knight took a tentative step backwards, feeling his way in the mist. She followed him, as best as she could. But then the Iwa-nin must've walked themselves off the edge of the mountain, because the next thing she knew, Deidara let out a yelp and they were both falling backwards. Before Hinata had time to scream, *another* hand grabbed her wrist, and kept her from plummeting. Unfortunately, Deidara had no such luck. "Deidara!" She screamed, focusing her Byakugan downward, but there was no sign of the Iwa-nin.

It was her cousin who finally hauled her back up on the rocks. Hinata doubted a fall like that could kill a shinobi, but Deidara had been injured, surprised, and falling backwards. Neji, however, didn't look like he had any sympathy for her fallen comrade. "Hinata-sama, are you alright?" He asked seriously, holding her out at arm's length. The stricken heiress nodded, hesitantly.

A moment later, she stifled another scream with her fist. The triple blades cut through the mist, there was a splatter of blood on her, and suddenly Neji was looking at her out of dead, white eyes with one blade sticking out of his neck, the other two buried (and poking out on this side) in his chest. "Niisan!" Her scream turned even shriller when her cousin's killer emerged from the mist, also covered in his blood, and attempted to wrench the scythe out of his corpse.

"Niisan? He was your brother?" Suigetsu asked dully, frowning when the scythe wouldn't come free. Hinata sobbed dryly, stumbling backwards. Her heel caught a stone, however, and she tripped. Her back landed hard on the dirt, and she cut her arm on a rather sharp rock.

Suddenly, the cadaver disappeared, and the scythe. Only a surprised-looking Suigetsu, bloodstain-free. "Oh shit. You broke out..." He frowned, one of his fangs poking out of his mouth again.

It-It was genjutsu...? she thought, hyperventilating. Hinata was still trying not to start crying. Tears

were welling up in her eyes regardless.

"Oh well. I'll just have to—" She never find out what he would have to do, because at that time her cousin, alive, unharmed and breathing, came out of the mist and hit the Kiri-nin in a full-out tackle. (It definitely wasn't the *Juuken* style, but she knew from experience that sometimes a shinobi just needed to hit something really, really hard.) Neji kicked Suigetsu once for good measure, then reached out his hand to help her up.

"Hinata-sama, are you alright?" She cringed at the same wording choice, but was overcome by simple gratitude that he was *alive*. "...Hinata-sama?" His voice sounded worried. She just sniffled miserably, hanging her head. Then she took a hesitant step forward, finally falling into his arms and throwing her own arms around his neck.

"Oh, N-Neji-niisan...! I-I'm so s-sorry!" He didn't question what she was sorry for, which was a good thing. She didn't know, either. She just clung to him, struggling not to cry, though dry sobs wracked her body. After a long while, while she was steadily embarrassing herself further and was about to pull away and apologize again, he put his own arms around her.

"It's alright. Everything's going to be alright, now." He murmured, rubbing her back comfortingly. She sighed, nodding into his shoulder.

Niisan... he's always been such a comfort for me. I'm glad I'm with him again, she thought distantly, reopening her eyes.

The first shock was that all the mist had disappeared. The second was that a furious-looking Deidara was standing directly behind her cousin, kunai pointed at the back of his neck. The blonde grinned. "Blind spot, yeah."

"Deidara-kun... don't..." Hinata breathed, pulling away from Neji. The Hyuuga prodigy stood stock-still, but was glaring with such intensity at the ground that it was a wonder it didn't explode. The kunoichi slowly stepped away from him, ashen eyes wide and flicking back and forth between her family and 'partner'. The choice was here. It was thrust upon her with no warning, and she hadn't expected it. But she had to do something.

Neji had always been there for her. He was her guardian, her friend, and her family. He had taught her, helped her, and protected her. But he had also tried to kill her, and almost succeeded. She had patched things up with him afterward, but that memory had haunted her. She loved him, both as a friend and as her brother. She couldn't deny that there might be something else as well, either.

But... he had been in the *Tsukuyomi*.

Deidara hadn't.

The Iwa-nin, however, was the opposite of her stoic cousin. He was loud, cheerful, friendly and affectionate. He had kidnapped her, initially, yes. He had killed her sensei and Akamaru. But he had saved her life, time and time again, and actually appeared to *value* her. Her opinion, her skills, all of Hinata. He accepted her, admired her, taught her things, and she couldn't deny that she enjoyed his company.

The decision was now. She had to choose.

Go back to Konohagakure, and be trapped within her family and the rules for the rest of her life. Be close to Naruto... but never have him. Live with her father. Try so hard and never get any farther for it.

Go with Deidara, into the Akatsuki. The most famed, feared and deadly shinobi organization of all time. Fight against *more* Akatsuki members. Risk her life for a self-appointed reconnaissance mission. Possibly receive more emotional trauma.

Instead, Hinata blinked, and asked, "Wh-Where did Suigetsu go...?" The kunoichi fielded the question for now, and instead looked for the cause of the problem. The Kiri-nin was gone, pure and simple. Deidara glanced around uneasily, but kept his position behind Neji. Neji, likewise, activated his Byakugan.

"He... left? Why did he leave?" The Caged Bird asked slowly.

The blonde snorted at him. "He wasn't your problem, anyway, yeah. That jerk is after *me*, and he was only using the Uchiha to get a better weapon. ...At least the scythe is still here." Hinata nodded slowly, noticing the forgotten weapon lying beside the rock Suigetsu had been sitting on last.

But then she noticed something else. Something that could possibly have a bigger impact than the missing Kiri-nin. "...Where is Sasuke?"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh noes! Not only does Hinata have to decide her own fate, but suddenly Neji's ally and their shared enemy both go missing! Is it connected? Or did Sasuke leave for another reason? More importantly, Deidara, Neji and Hinata are all together. No fights for distractions. Surely she's going to have to choose one or the other?

C'est La Vie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Sasuke is none of *my* concern, yeah." Deidara stated blandly. In all honesty, he was glad the Uchiha was gone. One less ninja for him to fight, at any rate. So now he just needed to get away from Neji, rescue the kunoichi, rescue their medic, too, and then be on his merry way to the next pair of Akatsuki members to fight. Simple, right?

Wrong, evidently.

"B-But..." The dark-haired girl's eyes flicked back and forth between he and Neji. With a mental curse, Deidara realized that she was torn between them. She couldn't decide which side to take.

The Iwa-nin couldn't honestly say he didn't feel a bit betrayed. He had never been good at making friends, and the Hyuuga may have been the closest thing he had ever had. He thought they'd been through enough to form some sort of relationship—bonded by trauma, possibly. But at the same time, he couldn't deny that she had left unwillingly from her home village, and there were still ties that weren't severed. With that thought, Deidara squinted suspiciously at the back of the male Hyuuga. Just how strong was their tie...?

"Could S-Sasuke have been... k-kidnapped?" She asked hesitantly, eyes on her clanmate.

"...Possibly. Without the Sharingan, he's as perceptive to genjutsu as any of us." Neji replied solemnly. Deidara couldn't read anything from his voice, and couldn't see his face, either. He'd have to use the girl to gauge his reactions.

"Bya-chan... we don't have time to waste. The time limit is already half up... yeah." The blue-eyed blonde said awkwardly, and slowly lowered the kunai from his fighting stance. He wanted to know if she would actually leave him, if given the choice. Call it masochistic, but it was also a test of trust. If she turned him down now, he didn't need a partner. He'd just have to rely on his own skills to get into the Akatsuki.

Neji half-turned, eyeing him warily. But the Konoha jounin didn't make any moves to attack. The truce had been called. "Hinata-sama, we'll need to go back to Konohagakure and assemble a proper team to go after Sasuke. And... I'll probably have to apologize as well. Neither of us will be allowed on that mission, undoubtedly."

She gave him a questioning look. Deidara did as well.

"I, well, I technically became a missing-nin. Uchiha and I both."

That was a low blow, the explosives user thought, scowling. *But two can play at that game, yeah.*

"But Bya-chan," he whined plaintively, "I still need a partner to fight the Akatsuki...! And who's gonna be my partner once I get in, yeah?"

She reddened at the pointed attention she was receiving from the two of them, and hung her head. Her hair shielded her face from view, and Deidara took the opportunity to stick his tongue out at Neji. "Y-You two..." She said finally, and both guys turned to look at her once more. "Would you two please cut it out?" The Hyuuga raised her head again, and looked pleadingly at them. "I-I can't decide."

"Hinata-sama, are you serious—"

She cut him off, "*You* tried to kill me once." Neji looked so shocked that it was almost comical. In fact, Deidara had to stifle a snicker with his hand. But that only brought the stressed kunoichi's gaze on him. "And *you* took me away from everything and everyone I love." That stopped his snickering. But she was not done. "You both are special to me, a-alright? Neji-niisan, I love you, but I hate the way the rest of the family treats me. Konohagakure is a cold place toward weaklings like me... But Deidara-kun, you're special to me, too. You don't care that I'm quiet, that I'm weak, that I'm the heiress! You value me for *me*, and you don't coddle me."

The two shinobi looked at each other, as if surprised that there was an actual contest between them. Deidara chalked it up to the usual male arrogance.

But the kunoichi wasn't done. She may not have been very talkative previously, but it looks like the flood gates had given way. "Neji-niisan... I'm sorry. I'm s-sorry... but Deidara-kun has been nicer to me." The blonde was grinning, but she quickly shot him down. "But I've known niisan so much longer... We have so many more memories together. There are things we share that you and I could never duplicate, Deidara-kun. ...I'm sorry."

Now what was she apologizing for? Deidara swallowed nervously. He wasn't liking where this was going. Deny it all he liked, but he had grown attached to her. (But no doubt that Neji was attached to her as well.) He liked her fighting style, he liked her motherly nature, he liked her kindness. The Akatsuki would be a pretty dark place without her.

But then, the poor girl said the magic words. "Wh-Why can't you two just decide...?" They were on each other before she could react. "Without fighting!" She added hurriedly, successfully halting them both. Deidara reluctantly called back the bird, and Neji just-as-reluctantly pulled his hands back from the *Juiken* strikes.

"I'm a better shinobi anyway... yeah..." Deidara grumbled, crossing his arms.

He felt Neji's glare, even without the added, "*What?*"

"You heard me." The blonde snickered. If it came to a verbal battle, he would most definitely win. "I'm the better shinobi here. Though I can't see why Bya-chan can't—"

"Then why are *you* the one to always run from the fight?" Neji asked scathingly, interrupting his question. Deidara twitched slightly, but mastered his irritation.

"Hmm, let's examine that accusation, shall we, yeah? First fight: I blew up half the forest and was out of there before you and your team even woke up—"

"You only blew it up to try to escape!"

"—and in the second fight, you were drunk, and I was chakra-depleted, yeah, not to mention all of the non-shinobi around—"

"You still ran for it after Sasuke used his *Gokakyuu*."

"—and this last time, I was only running to rescue Bya-chan, yeah!"

"You have still fled from every fight you're in." The Hyuuga pointed out annoyingly.

"Yeah? Well what about *you*? I recall that I'm always the one kicking your ass whenever we get together." Deidara retorted dryly, accidentally swearing in front of the lady. At this point, he didn't

care, though. But before Neji could reply, he continued, "Besides, I'm obviously the better choice. While I may have kidnapped her, at least I didn't try to kill her."

The poor kunoichi just watched silently, the beginnings of an embarrassed blush coming into her cheeks. Neji, on the other hand, went stark white at that jab. Luckily for him (or Deidara, as the case might have been), she spoke up and broke up any potential fights. "C-Can't you two... um... work this out *peacefully*...? Please?"

The blonde looked like he might hit Neji anyway, for the fun of it, but stayed still and gave her a curious look. Then, he grinned, and declared, "Bya-chan, even if Neji *somehow* escapes with you, don't worry, yeah. I'll chase you down again. Because it seems that you've somehow become that important to me."

-.-.-

Neji thought that the Iwa-nin was about to pull a Lee-like stunt and do the good-guy pose. Thank the heavens that he didn't. "Likewise, Hinata-sama." He added quietly, turning his attention back to his cousin.

She was flustered, red-faced and pushing her index fingers together, a habit he had thought she'd abandoned long ago. Hinata honestly didn't know which of them to pick; that only made him wonder at just *what* they had been through together to create that strong of a bond. She looked increasingly nervous, and if the brunette didn't know any better, he might think that she would pick between them by something as juvenile and hasty as flipping a coin.

Repressing the urge to roll his eyes, Neji also had to wonder if Deidara had *any* shame. Couldn't the man see that he was forcing her to make an impossible choice? (Absently, Neji's conscious mind was drawn back to his first chuunin exam, and Morino Ibiki's impossible choice.)

Deidara started giggling. The Hyuuga prodigy raised an eyebrow, looking at him incredulously. Hinata must've given him some sort of look as well, because he chuckled a bit more, then explained, "Heh, it was like this game we used to play in Iwa. Like tag, yeah. It's sort of like what we're doing here."

"What kind of missing-nin *are* you?" The jounin deadpanned.

"An elite one." The so-called elite missing-nin retorted primly.

It was then that the Caged Bird decided to end this game. He was tired of chasing after his cousin, and of the Iwa-nin's arrogance. Hinata needed to come home with him, and hopefully forget this little escapade and Deidara. The first step would be returning to Konohagakure with him, preferably before Deidara could 'tag' him back and steal her again. (He was getting closer to his goal, the Akatsuki, and if he ever made it in with her, it would be just this side of impossible to get her back.)

Temporarily ignoring the kunoichi's plea for no violence, Neji turned to face his opponent. Simultaneously delivering a taijutsu chop to the neck and a *Juuken* strike to the heart was tricky, but easy, thanks to the element of surprise. Deidara only had time to let out a strangled sound, coughing up a bit of blood in the process, before he was out cold. And before his cousin could stop him, he hauled the Iwa-nin upright, and shoved him off the side of the cliff.

Neji grabbed Hinata's wrist, forcing his chakra down into his feet to cushion his own descent. "Come, Hinata-sama." He said shortly, and jumped, yanking her along with him.

The two Hyuuga shinobi landed safely on the ground. Kabuto looked mildly surprised at the sight of Neji with Hinata, but was too busy healing Deidara to care much. The look Neji gave him probably helped deter him from any chasing.

"Neji!" He knew she wouldn't be happy about that trick. "Wh-Why did you do that?"

"Kabuto is healing him now. He will survive, and he will come after us. I needed to end that before it deteriorated into a fight." He replied shortly. "Or did you want to choose to go with him?"

"..." She looked away, her dark hair hiding her face. "...N-No... I don't know..." And then, in an even tinier voice (that he had to question that he even heard), she added, "Thank you, Niisan..."

-.-.-

Sasuke awoke to large, light eyes staring down at him. Then he felt that he was unbound, though his chakra was depleted. Suigetsu leaned away from him, grinning. "It's nice to see that genjutsu works on even the great Uchiha clan."

"I didn't have my Sharingan." The avenger replied carefully, surveying his surrounding discreetly. He recognized none of it. And without any jutsu, it would take awhile for him to get back to anywhere he would recognize. Just like the Kiri-nin wanted, no doubt.

"At any rate, you won't be able to turn it on for awhile." Suigetsu said idly, examining his nails. Sasuke turned his glare on him, and smirked when he recoiled slightly. (Even without their bloodline limit, the Uchiha clan were famous for their glares.)

"Why are we here?" He asked coldly.

"Simply put, you're going to guide me to Zabuza-sempai's sword. And since I have no idea whether your side ended up with little miss heathen, I am going to help you with two other things." Cheerfulness was restored, even with the continued glare.

Sasuke just stayed quiet, waiting for him to elaborate.

"First, I am going to help you take down your brother. I want his partner, Hoshigaki Kisame, dead." Suigetsu leaned in again, grinning broadly. The Uchiha twitched a bit at it.

"Not interested. I don't need help." The black-haired shinobi stated.

"We'll see. First we're picking up that sword, after all. But... I'm curious, Sasuke-kun. Is that seal stopping you from utilizing your Sharingan?" The Kiri-nin asked innocently, rocking back as he adjusted the belt around his chest. Sasuke narrowed his eyes, and didn't answer. "Because if that's the case, we're going to have to get that off, now aren't we?"

Still, he stayed silent.

"There are three people that I know of that can remove that seal. One of them is dead, and I plan on exacting that revenge at a later date. One doesn't tangle with the Akatsuki without the proper

weapon, right? But I digress. The second is that bastard, Kabuto. But since he's also with that guy, we're going to have to stay away. The third is who we're going to see."

Finally, Sasuke's curiosity and hatred of the seal got the better of him. "...Who else is there?"

"*After* we get my sword." Suigetsu said good-naturedly.

Sasuke growled at him. He may not have any jutsus, but he still had his own sword, and he still knew plenty of taijutsu. "Who. Is. It."

The Kiri-nin looked at him for a moment, his smile faltering. "His name is all you want to know? Fine. His name is Juugo. Juugo of the Scales."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Well, Hinata ended up with Neji! But can the two Hyuuga make it back to Konoha before Deidara catches up with them again? And what about Deidara's test for the Akatsuki, anyway? He's running out of time and who knows who else he needs to fight! But now we know about Sasuke, or at least what happened to him. So what's going to happen to him, and will he give into the temptation of having the seal removed? (Or teaming up with Suigetsu to fight Itachi, for that matter?!)

What About After Happily Ever After?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata wasn't sure if she had heard her protector quite right. The pair had stopped for the night, back safely in a forested area, and she was busy poking the fire to keep the flames up. Neji had just returned from a quick scouting trip, checking for anything out of the ordinary. That was part of why she wasn't sure if she had heard him correctly or not.

"U-Um...?" Regardless, she felt her face heat up.

Neji looked at her coolly, holding his hand out. "Your jacket," He repeated, finally. The heiress frowned in confusion. He sighed, and said again, "Your jacket, Hinata-sama. Take it off, please. I need to give you a physical to see if you're hurt anywhere."

Yes, that was what she had thought he said.

Hinata felt her cheeks redden even more. "U-Um... I-I'm fine...!" She said hastily, shifting nervously. The kunoichi, unlike most other girls her age, wasn't comfortable without her heavy jacket. She needed her long sleeves and baggy clothing. Without it, especially in the simple sleeveless top (albeit with netting underneath), she felt, well, naked. Usually even her best friends had to fight with her to get the jacket off. And here her cousin was, just demanding!

"You don't know that, and neither do I." Neji replied calmly, still holding out his hand for the coat.

"Kabuto-ku—Kabuto ga-gave me a check-up... I'm fine... R-Really!" She was playing on the fact that he knew full well just how good of a medic Kabuto was. Hinata was also hoping and praying that he didn't ask *when* he gave her that check-up. Because she really didn't want to lie to him.

"And when was this?" He asked impassively, raising an eyebrow. She cringed; he could still read her all too well. "Hinata-sama..." Neji paused to sigh, then continued, "Please. Even if you believe you are fine, you were just fighting against that Kiri-nin, not to mention the Akatsuki. *And* Sasuke. As much as I'd like to believe it, there is no possible way that you escaped all of that unharmed."

She winced again, trying to ignore the truth in his words. Neji knew, had always known, just how to get past her (rather weak) defenses. Hinata instinctively ducked her head and seemed to shrink in upon herself, trying to hide any injuries she may be sporting. (Now that he had mentioned it, she actually did feel those bruises around her neck, her shoulder was stiff, and she suddenly realized that she may have cracked a few ribs. Not to mention whatever internal and other damage she couldn't feel.)

"Hinata-sama, now you're obviously hiding something. Show me your neck." Neji sighed again, shaking his head. She couldn't help but smile slightly at his exasperation, even if she was the cause of it. But the kunoichi obediently tilted back her head, though she only did so reluctantly.

She heard him gasp, and could only guess at what kind of marks the collar had left. Her protector was beside her in an instant, asking, "Who did that?"

"Th-That taller Akatsuki member... Kakuzu..." She felt him heal the minor bruises, though it really was unnecessary.

Unfortunately, their closer proximity allowed him to sneakily grab her sleeves, and was yanking

the jacket off over her head before she could do much more than offer a squeak and a small flail. "Niisan!" she grabbed for the coat, rather pitifully, as her other arm was crossed over her chest protectively. "Gi-Give that b-back...!"

He just slung it over his shoulder, inspecting her body with his Byakugan. "Your shoulder seems to be in an interesting position... did you dislocate it recently, and just force it back into its socket?" The brunette asked calmly.

She shook her head, crossing her arms and drawing her knees up to her chest. "No... that would have happened when Deidara-kun tried to haul me up onto the bird... during the fight." Hinata could've sworn that her cousin smirked smugly, but with the flickering firelight, it was impossible to tell.

"You also appear to have two cracked ribs." He continued quietly, white eyes flicking down to her chest.

"That would have been from Sasuke." The heiress explained, scowling slightly. "Wh-When he tackled me. Trying to get me away from Deidara-kun and the bird..."

"There are also many small scratches, *burns*, and a rather large bruise on your left thigh." Neji finished his examination, blinking slowly. "...Hmm. I could probably fix the ribs, but I most likely couldn't do anything more for your shoulder. Does it impair your abilities?"

Hinata carefully rotated her arm, moving it several times and testing it, and finally shook her head. "Not much... I can fight." He just nodded.

"The minor wounds won't do much, as long as you clean them out and stop them from getting infected." He murmured, tapping his foot lightly in the dirt. Behind him, the moon finally rose above the treetops.

But she would have none of this. "What about you, niisan...? You said it yourself; th-there was no way to escape that fight un-unharmed..." She narrowed her light eyes at him, pouting. (That was part of Deidara's charm. He didn't spend unnecessary attention on her, and even if he did, it wasn't because she was the Hyuuga's heir. It would have been just because she was a girl, and for that reason, the attention almost felt nice. Neji, on the other hand, was overprotective, plain and simple. He also had the bad habit of passing off rather frightening injuries as mere flesh wounds or scratches.)

"I wasn't in the fight as long as you were." Her half-glare answered his comment. "...And I already healed the injuries of mine." It was a blatant lie, even she could see that. But unlike him, she had no way to force him out of it, or force him into healing his own wounds.

Hinata just suppressed a sigh and tentatively held out one hand for her coat back. He gave her a questioning look. "M-My jacket...?" She prompted.

"I haven't mended those ribs yet." Neji responded coolly. "Now stand up."

--.-

A blue eye slid open, taking in the darkness. He got the strangest feeling of déjà vu as he sat up, rubbing his neck. "You're awake." Deidara turned to see Kabuto reclining lazily on a rock. The

medic rolled back his shoulders as he stood back up.

"Where's Bya-chan, yeah...?" The blonde asked slowly, looking around.

"Did you come up with that nickname all on your own? It stands for 'Byakugan', right?" Kabuto asked innocently. He ignored him. "You can thank me later. I've saved your life, probably for the second or third time." The (hopefully) ex-spy added after a long pause.

Deidara just narrowed his eye.

"You must have hit your head harder than I thought." He said, smiling casually. "Neji knocked you out and threw you off the cliff. He and Hinata-chan are probably several dozen kilometers away by now. They departed about, oh, three to three and a half hours ago."

"What?!" The Iwa-nin bolted upright, jumping to his feet in the same move. "Damn it, we have to go after them! Now, yeah!"

"No, I believe the words you were looking for were 'thank you, Kabuto, for saving my worthless life once more'. Or something to that effect." Kabuto stayed in his spot, though he turned to aim a smirk at his temporary teammate. Deidara glared flatly back.

"You are an asshole, do you know that?" He asked.

"I try."

"I don't see why Bya-chan insisted on vouching for you."

"Because she is sweet and warm-hearted and couldn't bear to see you kill someone she felt she was indebted to? Because she has a conscience? Because she doesn't hate anything with an ANBU mask with an irrational loathing?"

Deidara turned away from him again, ignoring his jabs and the fact that he really *did* hate anything with an ANBU mask with an irrational loathing. But that was neither here nor there. (That was roughly three or four years in the past and about a hundred kilometers inland in Iwagakure.) What was needed right now was action. Preferably the chasing type of action. "I'm flying. I don't know how you're going to keep up, yeah."

"And what are you going to do when you *do* catch up with them and Hinata-chan asks where I am?" Kabuto asked, stepping over to him.

"I'll tell her you died." Deidara ignored the movement, instead plunging his hand inside his clay pouch, gnawing on a large enough bit to turn into a sizeable bird. He withdrew his hand again, watching the mouth chew, working it into the fastest shape he could think of.

"And then how will she ever trust you again when I show up, alive and well, to find out that you lied? Relationships aren't built on lies." The medic chirped cheerfully. He smiled pleasantly, but it annoyed Deidara because he knew it was fake, no matter how genuine it looked. (It also annoyed him that Kabuto could create fake expressions so well.)

"You've died once already." He said simply. For a moment, the silver-haired ninja looked angry, but quickly smoothed his expression into a tamer one of mild annoyance. "And between you and I, we both know that relationships *are* built on lies. We're shinobi. I'm not stupid, yeah. I just haven't figured out who you're working for yet."

Then the bird hopped to life at the sign of his hand, and the Iwa-nin flew off without so much as a

backwards glance.

-.-.-

Hinata awoke the next morning to three of the strangest revelations she had ever had. (Technically, she didn't 'awaken', though. It was more like she finally fought her way out of the genjutsu-induced nightmares and into proper consciousness. She didn't feel rested in the least.)

The first was that she missed her cousin. He wasn't anywhere in her limited range of vision, and she couldn't hear him breathing nearby. This was not a completely unfamiliar feeling for her; when they were both much younger, she would miss him from time to time. (But that was before he started truly hating the main house.)

The second was more startling. It was that she missed *Deidara*. Hinata quickly chalked it up to wanting some sort of human comfort, not necessarily just from him. She was still monstrously confused when it came to the blonde, and even more confused about the whole surreal-feeling kidnapping.

The third revelation was that she was outside. And yet somehow she had a pillow and a blanket. Without packing either item.

The heiress sat up, and at least solved the mystery of the third—it was merely her jacket. Which was odd, because Neji had hidden it from her earlier, and refused to give it back. The pillow, as well, turned out to be another jacket. Her cousin's. Frowning slightly, she wondered why he had done that—and more importantly, where he was now, so she could return it. Hinata picked it up (after, of course, putting on her own coat and zipping it up to her chin), and absently petted the crimson fabric as she searched for the jounin.

She stood up, dusting herself off, and looked around with her Byakugan. No sign of him. Which was odd, considering how protective he was; why would he leave her when she was sleeping? Unless he had been attacked, and was still fighting somewhere, or *he* had gotten kidnapped, or worse... someone had attacked and he'd been killed...

But, the rational part of her mind stated as the rest of her mind began to panic, *in all likelihood, he just finally figured out a way to fool the Byakugan, and is showing it off. Arrogant jerk.* (No matter how much she loved and admired her cousin, those two last words never failed to describe him perfectly.) The kunoichi nodded to herself, forcibly calming herself down and making herself believe that. *Or... maybe he just wandered off, scouting the area or gathering food... I should probably go find him, then.*

With one final nod, Hinata leapt into a tree, and started looking in that direction. (Plus, it wouldn't hurt to know the terrain a bit.) She just had to keep telling herself that she wanted to return his shirt, not that she was worried over the fact that she doesn't know where he was.

Oh... I'm so clingy, the heiress realized with a depressed sigh. *It's either Neji-niisan or Deidara-kun or Naruto-kun. Ahh... no, not Naruto-kun. Not... anymore, I think. I don't want to think about him right now.*

Naruto was still a confusing subject for her. While his absence didn't really make her heart grow too much fonder, she had missed him. But she hadn't seen the loud blonde since that first disastrous

attempt at a rescue. Had he given up on her? And even without that saddening thought of abandonment, Itachi's genjutsu was already warping her mind. Sasuke she probably wouldn't trust as far as she could throw, and it was only because Neji and her had grown up together that his part in the jutsu didn't affect her as much. Naruto... was a different story. He had turned into a *monster*, one that had killed and maimed and tortured her. A monster that vaguely resembled the dreaded Kyuubi no Kitsune. Three of her distant cousins and one of the elders had died in that beast's attack. The Hyuuga clan *hated* the Kyuubi.

Was it that inbred hatred that was making her think less and less of the boy she had once admired so greatly? Just because a genjutsu had transformed him into a fox-like monster? Hinata shook her head to try to clear it. She would just have to ask someone about that, then. Uzumaki Naruto's connection to the Kyuubi no Kitsune.

Perhaps... Neji-niisan would know? He's a genius, after all, she thought, strengthening her resolve to find him all that much sooner. The two did have quite a lot of things to talk about.

After almost a quarter of an hour, her Byakugan caught sight of his familiar chakra signature. She sighed in relief, switching off her bloodline limit as she swung down from a branch to come face-to-face to him.

Unfortunately for the meek girl, he was wet and shirtless.

"H-Hinata-sama?" Neji asked in surprise. Hinata was too shell-shocked (and busy staring at his chest) to reply. His jacket was still clutched to her chest, but she had promptly forgotten why she had wanted to talk to him in the first place.

The Hyuuga heir had seen her protector shirtless many times. None recently, but enough for her to *almost* get accustomed to it when he came home, sweating, dirty and half-naked from training with Lee. But usually she had some kind of warning beforehand. She felt herself getting ready for yet another of her 'I'm-so-embarrassed-I'm-going-to-faint' episodes.

What made it worse was the fact that he looked *good*. Hinata had always known that Neji was a handsome shinobi, and Ino and Tenten were both quick to agree on that subject. His skin was darker than hers, but not so much tanner that it conflicted with the usual Hyuuga look—dark hair and light eyes. Neji never had been as obviously muscular as Lee or Kiba, but he held another of the Hyuuga's charms; a lithe, elegant body and hidden strength.

His hair was down, another thing she was used to. But it was wet, falling into his eyes and still dripping. And with a small gasp, Hinata also noticed (*finally* looking up at his face) that his hitaite and bandages had been removed, revealing the Hyuuga's infamous Cursed Seal. It had been almost two years since she had last seen it. His dark hair hid most of it from view, but she only needed to see a single slash of green on his otherwise perfect skin to know it was still there.

"Hinata-sama." He repeated in an unfortunately unreadable voice. She hoped to all the gods she knew that it was amusement she heard in it, not impatience or resentment.

Wordlessly she held out his jacket, turned on her heel, and mechanically stalked away. Her face must've invented new shades of red to cover that mortifying incident.

Luckily, he didn't follow her. Hinata would've fainted if he had done that, no questions asked. Even now, her vision was starting to get blurry and her head felt light and fuzzy. *I... I can't believe that just happened. And I-I was just staring at him! Shamelessly! Oh gods, what will niisan think of me now...? What do I think of me now?!* Her mind was reeling and she couldn't offer any answers to any of those questions.

She had been *staring* at her cousin. Neji. The elite, genius, prodigal jounin. The one who had been with her nearly her whole life. The same one who had almost killed her in her first Chuunin Exam, and later apologized. The one who helped her train, taught her the basics of the *Kaiten* (which she hadn't been practicing), who beat up Kiba once because he had made a comment about her annoyingly large chest in front of him. The one who had saved her life in more than one mission. The one who had been assigned to protect her since her birth. The one who never failed to give her something perfect for every birthday.

She had been staring at *that* Neji like Sakura and Ino used to stare at Sasuke.

Her face went redder, and she stumbled. Hinata was positive she was going to faint any second now. And it went redder still when a sudden thought struck her.

Throughout her whole life, Neji had always instilled some kind of strong emotion in her. In the beginning, it was fear. But as time went on, she never stopped loving him. (In fact, he was most likely her favorite family member.) Every time they met, her heart sped up. She usually blushed in his presence. But he was also the first person she stopped stuttering in front of. He was a staple in her life, one that she was emotionally attached to, regardless of whether that was a good or bad thing.

Hinata frowned slightly, bracing herself against a nearby tree. Her emotions had always confused her, and it was things like this (and that genjutsu, that horrible genjutsu) that only made it worse. In fact, it seemed every time she gave some feeling some thought, it got worse and more confused.

N-No... I'm not going to let that continue. I want to be able to... uh... identify my emotions. Embrace them. I want to know what I'm feeling. She vowed suddenly. The kunoichi decided on the spot to overcome these emotional problems before working on any others in her life. Perhaps then, she would be able to change for the better.

And I'll start with Neji-niisan.

-.-.-

Neji had never been one to be embarrassed. In fact, he could probably count the number of times he had been on one hand. Naruto coming up out of the ground to beat him with a single punch, a drunken Lee beating the snot out of him and then having the audacity to forget all about it, Gai. (Just Gai. Whenever his sensei was near him, Neji couldn't help but feel embarrassed.)

That scene a moment ago would be one of them.

He had had his Byakugan active when he was washing (blood was terrible to try to get out of his hair and clothes), but for some reason he had thought it was a bright idea to deactivate it as he was dressing.

At least I had pants on, the brunette thought dryly. He looked down at the returned jacket, wondering if Hinata had really tracked him down just to give it back to him. Then again, he wouldn't put it past her. She just did those kind, little things for other people.

This was definitely going to get awkward when he got back to their makeshift camp.

So Neji, being the honorable and dignified shinobi he was, decided to make a run for it and stay

the heck away for a few hours. He wasn't sure what would happen if Hinata looked at him like that again. (It was mostly shock that stopped him from doing anything the first time.) He pulled on his shirt, and wrapped the jacket around his waist again. The fabric felt vaguely uncomfortable against his wet skin, but he didn't care at the moment.

So instead the Caged Bird leapt across the river (reminded of the last time he tried it), and ran up the tallest tree in the area. Then, precariously sitting on the highest branch that would support his weight, he sat and thought.

Or, perhaps, daydreamed is a closer word to describe it.

The brunette had long ago learned to live in his own mental world sometimes, when it suited him. (Like when Lee and Gai went on one of their choruses, or when Naruto talked, or even sometimes during some of the long and boring Hyuuga clan meetings.) He let his mind drift through conscious thoughts, unconscious thoughts, past dreams, memories, and future plans. A lot of times, it really helped to calm him down or help him think of something he needed, or sometimes just a confidence fix.

He imagined himself as a bird, a caged bird that had been freed. He hopped along through different memories, marveling at certain things, sighing at others. As per usual, Neji halted on his fight with Kidoumaru. The spider shinobi. It had been one of his most frustrating, most desperate fights, ever, and the whole time his mind was racing. That particular memory always made him squirm inside. He had been trying to stay one step ahead of the strategist, stay away from his bugs and his weapons and his web, and the whole time he was thinking *if I die what will happen to everyone else?* The impact your life had on others is never really a good thing to ponder.

Neji continued on through his memories. His upgrade to chuunin was a nice one; it had been a flawless exam for him. But he only wore the vest for one year after that; Lee made chuunin in the exam after his, and started wearing the vest then. Even then, though, it was an amusing memory.

His jounin initiation wasn't quite as amusing, or happy. Frankly, he'd nearly died, and he had the same mental process as with his fight with the Sound Four member. Only this time, when he emerged (victorious yet again, of course), bloody, bruised and missing a rib, Hinata had been waiting (with his team) at the 'finish line'. Even though the medics waiting looked like they had an ulcer when she rushed forward and hugged him, burying her face in his neck, he thought it was worth it. (Though ruining her formal kimono with the blood might not have been worth it.)

Another rather cherished memory of his was the first time Lee beat him. They had been at a restaurant, celebrating Lee and Tenten's rise to chuunin, and Lee had gotten drunk. The resulting fight took out a whole wall of the restaurant, seventeen tables, too many chairs to count, and it took Tenten, Gai and Asuma (who had been in the restaurant next door with his own team) to finally take the new chuunin down. Though the defeat had stung at the time, now it was funny.

Unfortunately, the Caged Bird returned to reality with the sight of a *real* bird. The kind he didn't want to see right now. A scouting bird. A *clay* scouting bird.

It was about a kilometer east of him, scanning the treetops. It was small, and had he not been staring in that direction, he probably wouldn't have seen it. There was no sign of the Iwa-nin, for which he was glad. Neji slid down the tree, landing softly on the ground, and took a moment to position himself in the direction of the camp. The sun had sailed across the sky while he was daydreaming, and it was rapidly nearing twilight. At least that should impair the enemies' sight.

The pale-eyed shinobi sprinted toward his cousin and their stuff, keeping a Byakugan eye out for any more birds or his least favorite Iwa-nin. Whereas it had taken him roughly a half hour,

walking, to get to that tree, it only took about five minutes to run back. Then again, he knew where he was going. Hinata looked up, in surprise, as he burst into the camp, surveying the scene. Still no sign of Deidara, or any more of his birds. So they were safe, for the moment, but he wouldn't wait around for—

Neji's train of thought crashed and burned when he caught sight of his cousin. She was looking at him, *evaluating* him. And she was *frowning*. She never looked at him like that. Hell, he couldn't even remember any time she had looked at him and frowned, really. Not like the way she was frowning now. It wasn't really a thoughtful frown, it was more like an 'I-need-to-say-or-ask-something-but-I'm-not-sure-if-*he's*-the-one-I-should-ask-and-it's-confusing-me'. (Needless to say, Neji could still read her quite well.)

"N-Neji-niisan... I have a question... um..." She finally said softly, looking down at her feet.

"... Yes, Hinata-sama?" He blinked as he replied. Suddenly, he couldn't quite remember why he had so urgently run back for. Even if Deidara was near, he could still fight.

The navy-haired girl mumbled something in reply. He didn't catch it, so she slowly repeated, "I've told you... don't call me 'Hinata-*sama*'..."

"Habit." He said automatically. They have both been over that subject many times, and every time it ended with him saying he'd stop calling her that. He never did. "And respect for the clan heir."

"I don't need your formal respect, Neji-niisan." She said, her voice growing a bit in volume. It at least made it easier to hear her. "Please... just call me Hinata."

"Even if I didn't call you Hinata-sama, I wouldn't ever just call you Hinata." The brunette stated quietly. His heart was pounding in his ears.

"A-Alright... whatever you wish," she sighed. Then Hinata reopened her ashen eyes, Byakugan dormant, and locked eyes with him. "Th-That question... you're good with emotions, aren't you..."

Neji raised an eyebrow, wondering where this was leading. "Yes..." Was she trying to go for the usual shinobi emotionless? Because that wouldn't work with her, and her emotional persona was one of her many charms.

"We-Well... I'm confused. Emotionally. I... I can't figure out a lot of things..." She asked, looking away again shyly. He almost sighed in relief.

"Emotional confusion is common among shinobi." He said carefully, instead. "What is it concerning?"

Finally, she looked up and locked gazed with him. Only this time, there was determination in her white eyes. "You."

-.-.-

Hinata's heart was pounding violently in her ribcage. She didn't think she had ever quite done something so nerve-wracking as admitting that. How much worse would it be when and if she talked to Naruto about this, then? The kunoichi tried to slow her breathing before she started hyperventilating.

Neji, on the other hand, didn't think the remark was of much significance. He just looked curious. "Me? How so?"

Mentally, she despaired. It probably would've been easier if he had guessed, or laughed it off, or do something other than ask her to elaborate. "U-Um... Well..."

I need to start with the genjutsu. No, or should I start with how I felt during those chuunin exams...? She debated momentarily, then took a deep breath.

Hinata told him about Itachi's *Tsukuyomi*, and his genjutsu role in it. How it plagued her in her nightmares. How she was confused about how it was affecting her judgment of him during the conscious hours. How she was grateful to him for saving her all those times. How her heart sped up whenever he was near. How she couldn't get the image of him with red eyes out of her mind. How a small part of her still wasn't sure if going with him back to Konohagakure was the best decision. How an even smaller part of her was angry at him for knocking Deidara out and pushing him over a cliff just to win the argument over her. She talked and talked, admitted things she probably wouldn't even dare to drunk, and the heiress was positive that this was the most she had ever spoken at one time in her life.

At the end of it all, full twilight was on the land. Neji just stood there, arms cross, grinning like he had heard an amusing story. Hinata frowned; had he thought it was all a joke? Could he even help her? Why was he even smiling like that?

"That certainly is confusing." Her cousin said instead, surprising her with the tone of amusement. He closed his eyes as he smiled, and the genuineness of it made her smile meekly.

"W-Well...?"

"Most of that, I'm sorry, you're going to have to figure out on your own. But some of it... it seems that you're more attached to Deidara than you appeared. Is life with the Akatsuki really all that appealing?"

"U-Um... not the Akatsuki, particularly... more... him..."

"And how do you feel about *him*?" He asked critically.

But Hinata would not be swayed on the subject. "We're supposed to be talking about *you*."

Neji sighed, and smiled ruefully. "Fine. Frankly, you have described many of the textbook symptoms of the HLKS."

Her eyes widened. She hadn't thought she really *had* some kind of mental problem (except maybe that damn Stockholm Syndrome). But then her cousin laughed, and she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "And what is 'HLKS'...?"

"'Hormonal Lovestruck Kunoichi Syndrome'." Neji smirked. "I've seen quite a few cases of it myself, and a lot of your symptoms seem to match up."

Her jaw dropped. Was he implying...? Was he honestly implying what she thought he was implying? Worse, she knew that looking back on that jumble of feelings, a lot of them *were* rather... kunoichi-ish. Like Sakura and Ino in the presence of Sasuke...

"As for the rest of it," He assumed a stereotypical thinking pose, tapping his chin, "If I were a psychological medic-nin, I would say that you need to talk to the source. In this case, that would very likely be Uchiha Itachi. And since that is neither wise nor exactly possible, I suggest that you

work through one emotion at a time and see where that gets you."

He was *teasing* her. Like when they were both genin and before he hated her. It was a warming notion. Hinata finally relaxed, cracking her own grin. Two could play at this game. "Well then, Dr. Hyuuga, I-I would say that the first problem to address would be the one standing right in front of me. Does that sound logical?"

Her cousin nodded solemnly, barely concealing his own smile. That alone made her giggle. (Her stoic, arrogant cousin trying to stop a smile.) "Quite logical."

"Hmm... then if I really do have HLKS, wouldn't I be squealing 'Neji-kun' at every opportunity?" She snorted back a laugh, which unfortunately only made her giggle harder. "L-Like Sakura-chan and Ino-chan used to do...?"

"Well, that's if you went after the Sasuke-type of ninja. Dark, handsome, arrogant, talented, the local heartthrob." Somehow, he was able to not laugh in this rather laughable situation. (Her father would probably have a heart attack if he could see the way the two were acting.)

"But, Neji-kun," Hinata did her best to mimic one of the many Sasuke fan girls, though had a feeling that her constant laughing threw it off, "You just described yourself!" She batted her eyelashes, clasping her hands together.

"Well, if I am the dark, handsome, arrogant and talented type, I wouldn't have just fallen for the first kunoichi to look cute." He placed his hands on his hips, smirking at her. Hinata looked innocent, as if she couldn't believe that he meant her. (In a way, she couldn't.) But then she promptly found out that neither Sakura nor Ino had ever gotten this far with Sasuke, and had no more information to base her teasing off of. Which meant that she had to improvise.

"It's just like a fairytale, right? Y-You would be the prince... and I would be the knight who rescued you from all of the other fan girls."

"I think you would have it backwards. I would be the obviously handsome knight coming to rescue the princess from the dragon." He corrected with a small chuckle. "Kunoichi don't get to be the knights."

"S-So you rescued me from the dragon, then, Mr. Knight...?" She asked, wondering where this was going again.

"Yes. I did. And now that I have safely rescued you, I become the king and you my queen and we rule over the dragon's kingdom and live happily ever after." The brunette jounin stated. He was obviously enjoying this as much as she was, even if she couldn't stop laughing. (And even if whenever he mentioned the dragon, she pictured Deidara and his fairytale. Frankly she had to wonder if Neji was alluding to that as well.)

"Of course!" Hinata chirped with a giggle. She undid her jacket, tying it around her waist, explaining, "This will be the princess' dress. Please put on your jacket—it can be your suit of armor?"

"Alright, and then we'll have to live happily ever after." He held out his hand for her, and she took it. Neji led her into the forest, not particularly caring where they went for the moment. "Would have involve marriage?" He asked innocently.

She just laughed, and said, "Sure, why not?" She needed some happy memories, and this was a pretty pleasant—not to mention funny—way to create them.

"Yes, then my queen, we will be wed in the most royal and dignified of manners! Guests will come from all different kingdoms and lands for this wedding. The royal priest will declare, 'you may kiss the bride!', and all the citizens of our kingdom will applaud as we kiss."

And then Neji leaned down and kissed her.

Hinata forgot all about their pretend fairytale, forgot about everything except his lips on hers, his arms wrapping around her, and her arms wrapping around him. She felt frozen, lips locked with his, though she knew that this felt *nice*. No, not just nice, this felt... *right*.

But then, they broke apart as another voice interrupted. "But what happens *after* happily ever after, yeah? Why, the dragon comes back to reclaim his princess, of course." Hinata turned to see Deidara, lazily sitting in a tree, watching them intently.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh noes! Deidara has caught up to them, and even caught them kissing! If he does manage to get Hinata back, how will that affect their relationship? Will he be angry, or will he be jealous? Or just plain awkward? How will Neji take this interruption? (And where is Kabuto? That boy keeps running off, doesn't he...? I wonder why...)

Hell Hath No Fury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A single raindrop hit the dust between them, turning into a small muddy droplet before being joined by a few more. Overhead, the pearly clouds grew darker. Far off in the distance, back in the direction of Iwagakure, lightning sparked across the black sky mutely. The wind picked up slightly, ruffling all of their rather long hair, whispering in their ears. The temperature dropped suddenly. A storm was coming.

And as Hinata looked into Deidara's visible eye, she thought, *yes... a storm is definitely coming.*

Long ago, in her early genin days, the heiress had once had a nightmare about this. Of course, the characters in that fairytale were quite different (given that she had never even imagined a man like Deidara existed and Neji still detested her), and it took place in Konoha, but the raw emotions of the scene were the same.

Surprise.

A little fright.

Shame.

And a fading, dizzy, almost *guilty* pleasure from the kiss.

Hinata swallowed nervously. A raindrop hit her nose, but she ignored it. Frankly, she was almost *scared* to move. Few times in their lives are shinobi really reminded of how strong they are. The kunoichi herself knew at least fifty ways to kill someone without using chakra or her *Juuken*. Neji and Deidara were in a completely different league.

And she was suddenly struck with the horrible thought that this time they might actually kill each other.

Most of her embarrassment forgotten, the dark-haired girl finally tore her gaze away from Deidara's, looking up into Neji's eyes. He was staring quite calmly at the Iwa-nin, though from her position she could feel his heart pounding rapidly in his chest. He was wound tighter than a spring, and she hated to think what might set him off—and how that would end.

She was almost thankful that Deidara spoke. Though judging from her cousin's expression, he was less than gracious. The blonde stood up in the tree, and jumped down onto the ground, eyes still on the couple. "You know, neither of us have been using our full strength these past few fights. I know I haven't, yeah. The situation never demanded it. But, as a jounin, you should know that every ninja needs to go full-out in some fights, just to work off all that excess energy, don't you, Neji?"

Oh god, Hinata choked on her breath. *Th-They are going to kill each other...*

Neji, on the other hand, stayed silent and kept his gaze as calm as possible.

"Would you like a demonstration of an Iwa jounin's full power?" Deidara asked quietly, narrowing his visible eye.

"Please..." The kunoichi breathed, afraid of where this was going. She didn't want this to go on, especially in the direction it was headed. She couldn't stand it if one—or both—of them died and it was *her* fault! "Please... don't..."

"Would you like a demonstration of why Konohagakure is the strongest shinobi nation, and the Hyuuga clan is the strongest clan inside it?" The brunette replied dangerously.

Hinata was starting to panic inside. These two were debatably two of the strongest shinobi she knew, and they knew each other's fighting styles. If they fought with all of their strength, it would be a long, bloody, tortuous battle. And she couldn't do anything to stop it if it progressed that far; she had to stop it.

The heiress reluctantly stepped away from her cousin, walking out into the muddy space between them. Both guys were standing under trees, dry and angry enough to start a forest fire. She, on the other hand, was now on her way to getting soaked (as the rain had picked up, and was now coming down quite steadily). Some of her hair fell into her eyes, but she didn't dare wipe it away. Instead, she activated her Byakugan, trying her best to muster a glare.

"Both of you," Hinata raised her voice to be heard over the rain and nearing thunder, "need to cut this out."

"Hinata-sama, get out of the way." Neji was using that voice again, the one that always made her follow his order. But she would stay strong this time. Hinata turned to stare at him, holding out one hand toward him in a stopping gesture.

"Bya-chan, like he said. Get out of the way." Deidara added, loosing his false cheer. But he grinned instead. The thing that scared her the most was that this was a *happy* grin, even when his voice was hard as stone. He was *happy* to finally get the chance to rip Neji's throat out. He was happy to get into a fight for his life. Hinata frowned and ignored the sting in her eyes, realizing just how much of a shinobi these two were.

"N-No... I won't move." She likewise held out a hand in his direction, halting him. The storm was coming closer, both literally and metaphorically. The kunoichi was now soaked, but ignored it.

"Hinata-sama. Move."

"Now, yeah. Neither of us want you in this fight."

Both missing-nin were starting to lose their patience, and the adrenaline and sheer panic she felt put an edge on her vision. Hinata could see Neji slowly forcing chakra into his legs for a jump, and into his palms for the Hyuuga clan's famous taijutsu. Deidara was also gathering chakra into his hands, though it looked more for some ninjutsu than for his usual clay explosives.

Deidara was going to attack first, at the rate he was moving his chakra.

Ironically, the Hyuuga heiress felt as if she had the Sharingan. She could *see* their moves before they made them.

The Iwa-nin made his first seal, and the frozen scene burst into action. Hinata tackled him and wrestled his hands away from each other, the force of her lunge sending them both into the tree he was just in. "Stop it!" She screamed.

"Let go of me!" He just shouted instead, freeing one hand from her grasp.

The kunoichi didn't have time to reply, as she whirled around to stop her cousin's assault. Hinata

was backed into Deidara's chest, one of his arms tucked under her own, her other free hand coming up in a half-version of the *Juuken*. Neji stopped dead, looking shocked that she would dare use their clan's taijutsu against him.

"Niisan, don't do this!" Hinata warned in a high voice. Tears were dripping down her cheeks, but the rain hid them. She was torn, and she hated having to do this. She hated the fact that they had to compete, she hated the fact that they were ninja from different villages, she hated the fact that they felt the need to kill each other.

She hated the fact that they were shinobi.

With that startling realization of loathing, Hinata came to realize why some people became missing-nin. To follow their own rules, to forge their own alliances, to be free of the villages shackles.

Deidara tried to shove her out of the way, but she just dug her heels in and pushed backward. He was pinned between her and the tree, and short of *forcing* her to move, he couldn't do much. Neji, too, was trapped. He couldn't attack the explosives expert without hurting her, either.

"Stop it! Both of you!" She repeated in a shriek. Thunder boomed high above them, at a deafening volume and almost drowning out her words.

Then she made her first mistake.

Unfortunately for her, it only takes one mistake to kill someone for shinobi.

Hinata let go of Deidara's other arm, bringing her free arm up in the full *Juuken* pose. Instantly he wrapped both arms around her stomach, forming seals again. And this time, she couldn't stop him. "*Doton: Dochuu Eigyo no jutsu!*"

Everything around her went black.

-.-.-

Deidara gave a cursory glance to the ground where his partner had just stood. She was safe underground—and more importantly, out of the way. At least for a good while. But a good while was all he would need to finish off the Konoha-nin. "She's safe, yeah. She'll either find her own way out, or I can get her out after I kill you. Probably the former; she's a clever girl."

Neji cracked a sardonic grin. "So we don't have much time, do we?"

"I think we'll have more than enough. For one simple reason." The brunette opposite him raised an eyebrow, still smirking. Deidara almost laughed at him. "You've only seen my *old* art, yeah. But I've made it better. You've only been fighting C1 clay. I now have C2."

The Hyuuga's fist connected with the bottom of his jaw then, sending him flying upwards. But the blonde took the opportunity to kick him in the same spot as he flipped, landing deftly on the tree branch he had just been in. Rubbing his cheek, Neji spat, "I won't give you the opportunity to use anymore of your parlor tricks."

Deidara just grinned gleefully. He *loved* the Byakugan's blind spot. "*Katsu.*" His scouting bird

from before detonated approximately a yard from his enemy's head. But this time, he wouldn't get cocky. He knew that while a bomb from that proximity had the potential to kill him, it most likely wouldn't have. The luckiest the Iwa-nin would've gotten is a head wound and pissing him off.

No, he wouldn't get overconfident in this fight. He was in this to *win* this time.

When the smoke cleared, predictably Neji was nowhere in sight. Though there was a small puddle of blood, getting watery from the rain, left behind. Chuckling to himself, Deidara waited in a fighting position for the inevitable attack.

He was not let down. Unfortunately, neither was he able to block. "*Konoha Daisenpuu!*" The brunette's foot connected with his jaw, and a split second later, his second foot delivered another sound kick to his chest. Deidara heard a crack as he flew backward, sailing into a sturdy tree before falling back down onto his feet. Neji was already coming at him again, this time with his usual *Juiken* strike.

"*Doton: Retsudotenshou!*" Deidara shouted as he sealed, then slammed his hands on the ground. Not ten feet in front of him, the jutsu caught Neji, sucking him down into the mud and dirt before covering him completely. Finally, the blonde sighed, and wiped the blood off his chin. (That kick had *hurt*.) He never liked using that jutsu, as every Iwa-nin knew it, but sometimes things couldn't be avoided.

Neji wasn't going to get out of that hole anytime soon.

One hand absently feeling his chest for any signs of cracked or broken ribs, Deidara walked lazily back to where he had put the kunoichi. She should be perfectly fine, unless she had claustrophobia. Then there might be a problem.

Still, he was unperturbed. She hadn't been in there that long, anyway.

Unfortunately, Deidara had been wrong before several times. The blonde discovered this when the fist struck the back of his head. He choked back a curse as he landed heavily on his chest, rolling over in time to dodge a kick aimed at his face. He jumped to his feet, getting eye-to-eye with a muddy, pissed, but almost completely unharmed Hyuuga Neji.

"How?!" The Iwa-nin spat as he wrenched back his arm to repay him for that punch.

Neji ducked the strike, trying for his own. Deidara avoided that, however, so the brunette stated, "My *Kaiten*. And the rain; mud isn't nearly as hard as stone."

"I suppose that's what I get for using Iwa jutsu, yeah. I think I'm just going to trust my art for this fight." Deidara shoved both of his hands into his clay pouches, biting off pieces as he jumped away from the Hyuuga. Neji followed only a few inches away, knowing it would take time to create his creatures. The blonde easily dodged most of his attacks, turning the one kick that landed into a backwards flip.

Deidara jumped upward, perching on the very top of a tree, throwing two sparrows downward. He dimly heard a "*Kaiten!*" over the roar of the wind and rain, and before the smoke cleared, Neji leapt up and landed upon the tip of another tree, on the far side of the clearing.

Both shinobi glared at each other, daring the other to make the first move. Unbeknownst to the Konoha-nin, however, Deidara still had a bird hidden in the palm of his hand. And plenty of clay left.

Unfortunately, though, jumping onto very tall trees and suddenly becoming the tallest object

around in the middle of a thunderstorm isn't very smart to do.

A bolt of lightning struck the tree to the *immediate* left of Deidara, and not worrying about anything except for anymore attacks from a pissed Mother Nature, he jumped off of the branch and hit the ground running. He felt more than saw Neji behind him.

The pair exchanged a quick flurry of punches and kicks, spraying water and mud everywhere. Neji feinted a kick to the stomach, and unfortunately Deidara didn't have time to think it through before ducking down to try to block. Next thing he knew, a kunai was buried in his chest, only narrowly avoiding his heart. The blonde looked up into the white eyes of the Hyuuga, almost scared for a moment. Lightning forked across the sky again, backlighting him, though his eyes caught the light.

Deidara grinned. He wouldn't die just yet.

"*Katsu!*"

"*Kaiten!*"

"*Doton: Shinjuu Zanshu no jutsu!*"

"*Hakke Kuushou!*"

Deidara slammed into the ground with another cracking sound, this time in his arm. But he was a shinobi, and jumped back up to his feet, ready for the next attack. But it wouldn't come; Neji had been caught in his jutsu. The very pissed-looking Hyuuga was almost totally immersed in the muddy soil, only his head aboveground.

Now it was Deidara's turn to look smug. "You're mine now, yeah."

Neji just glared at him.

"This," Deidara reached into his clay pouch again, searching for just the right hunk of clay to work with. He withdrew his hand, the mouth chewing furiously. "This... this is my C2." It spat out a miniature owl, the lifeless hollow eyes staring into the Hyuuga's. "More chakra and power than my old C1. You're not going to get away this time, yeah."

Neji remained silent and glaring. But his Byakugan was still active, and no doubt he was looking for some way to escape—or attack. The missing-nin noted this, and just to be sure he didn't have a *Kage Bunshin*, he kicked him. He remained solid, so Deidara went back to grinning.

"Bye-bye, yeah."

-.-.-

Hinata had finally figured out the jutsu's weak spot. Which, if she hadn't been so determined to not miss it, would have been obvious. It was right above her, at the spot where Deidara had buried her in the first place. The dark-haired girl sighed to herself. She couldn't even get angry at him for doing that.

Plus, by now, the fight would be over...

No! I won't give up! She thought suddenly, determinedly reactivating her Byakugan. Two bodies

were up above her, and behind her. But aside from an increased heart rate and a few minor injuries, both appeared fine. The heiress was almost relieved. But then she noticed a third chakra signature—a much smaller one. A clay one. *No, the fight's still happening—I have to stop them from killing each other!*

Hinata forced herself to calm down, then pointed out the weakest spot again to herself. With a well-aimed chakra strike, the earth above her head crumbled, and the dark light of the storm shone down on her. Lightning blinded her for a moment, but she hauled herself out of the hole, jumping to her feet.

"Bye-bye, yeah."

Deidara was suddenly behind her, resting an arm on her shoulder. In front of her, his clone disappeared in a puff of nin-smoke, and the bird in front of her cousin's head (*head?! she thought, panicky*) detonated. But before she could do much more than scream, the Iwa-nin behind her lifted her up onto another clay bird—one of his traveling ones.

They were above the treetops in a single wing beat. Deidara studied the bird's body, leaning upside-down over its head to check its beak and eyes. Hinata was too busy staring in wide-eyed shock down at the spot where the smoke was billowing up from the forest. "Y-You... killed..." She whispered, but her voice was lost in the storm.

"We'll have to double back before heading off, okay?" Deidara shouted casually over the wind, pulling himself back up onto the bird's neck. "I left Kabuto behind."

Hinata had barely heard him. Her eyes were still fixed on that spot, though it was shrinking and the smoke had disappeared. She didn't even have any tears to shed. *Niisan... is dead...* she thought disjointedly. The heiress was probably going into some sort of shock, but she didn't care. She couldn't comprehend what just happened—all of it.

She kissed Neji.

And then he died.

Deidara killed him.

All because they were shinobi and they had to compete and they had to fight because they were too different and because of *her*—Hinata finally gave a great snuffle, and broke down completely. Deidara looked up in alarm, but calmed down when he saw that her wail wasn't one of pain. The blonde just wiped a wet lock of hair out of his face and turned back to inspecting his bird.

Again, though, being the highest object in the sky during a thunderstorm is *not* the smartest thing to be.

The bird dodged violently to one side to avoid the lightning bolt, almost throwing both riders off. Still, the static from it was enough to temporarily disrupt the earth-based jutsu, and then dropped from the sky. Just above the treetops, though, the jutsu jerked back to life, almost throwing them off again.

Hinata barely noticed. As a kunoichi, she should be trying to stop her tears, stem the flood of tears and emotions this event brought on, but she didn't care. In fact, she didn't want to be a kunoichi right now; she wanted to mourn. She wanted to cry and cry until she shriveled up and died. Her closest thing to a brother, her protector, her Neji—just died.

And all because he was a shinobi.

Something inside of her must have snapped just then, because for one of the few times in her life, Hyuuga Hinata was *furious*. The storm raging around her just seemed to be a reflection of her anger, or perhaps fueling it. "I HATE YOU!" She screamed at the sky. Deidara jumped from the suddenness of it, his head snapping back to stare at her. Which, unfortunately, reminded her of the fact that *he* was the one who killed him.

"What?!" He looked actually *hurt*, as if she meant that for him. Which she did, at least as her cousin's killer she did. (Deidara the partner, Deidara the Iwa-nin, heck, Deidara the dragon she still all loved.)

But that look he gave her, of sheer hurt, of being wounded by those three simple words, hurt her more than anything else. Because if he could hurt, how could he call himself a shinobi? Why could *he* show those emotions? Just because he was a missing-nin?! That didn't make him ninja material—if he wasn't being a shinobi, why did that have to happen to Neji?

"I hate you!" She snarled at him, narrowing her tear-filled eyes. Was this supreme unfairness the fate that he had always talked about...? "I HATE YOU! I hate shinobi!"

Then Deidara pushed her over the edge of her anger. He shrugged, and grinned. Hinata lunged at him, but he caught her around the shoulders. "Why do you hate me? Why do you hate ninja, yeah?" He shouted back over the storm, his voice irritatingly calm.

"You're not a shinobi! You show emotions and you're *human*! BUT YOU STILL HAVE TO KILL LIKE ONE!" She screamed, struggling in his grasp. But unfortunately, her words were a lie; he was very much a ninja and still had the strength of one. She couldn't move.

"I have emotions because I *want* to! Nothing is stopping you—or Neji!" He replied loudly, wincing as the bird shuddered again from a too-close lightning bolt. "That doesn't make me any less of a shinobi!"

"Why are *you* free, then?! What gives you that right?! Neji-niisan and—and I have been caged all of our lives! It's not fair!" Hinata sobbed, going limp in his hold.

"I was caged, too, yeah! I broke free! Aren't you free now, Bya-chan? The cage you were in was just your village—you can act however you want outside it!" Deidara let go of her shoulders, smiling gently. "You're free now—you're a missing-nin! Nothing's unfair anymore; there's no rules or etiquette or specific way you should act!"

"But why? WHY?! I am not a missing-nin, you are, and you're horrible and YOU KILLED NIISAN!" She slapped him as hard as she could, breaking down again as he caught her wrist afterward to stop her from repeating the action. The bird slowly descended in the thunderstorm, though she didn't know why, nor cared.

"*Don't* hit me again!" Deidara snapped, grabbing her other hand for good measure. "We are shinobi, like it or not!"

"NO! I don't want to be a kunoichi anymore! I'm not going to kill others and kill my emotions and feel this way every time someone precious to me dies!" The heiress squeezed her eyes shut, trying once again to get away from him.

Deidara rolled his eyes (but she missed it, luckily). "I *didn't* kill Neji! He's still alive, yeah! He dug downward right before the bomb went off, so I didn't kill him!"

Her eyes snapped open again, and she looked up at him with a tearstained face. "...What...?"

"Bya-chan, I'm telling you: your boyfriend is still alive! He and I are both shinobi whether you want us to be or not, and you're still a kunoichi! We're all missing-nin at this point, so I don't care what you do, but it's up to you! Just don't hit me again!" He snapped.

The bird landed with a slight jolt, and Kabuto looked up from his position on a rock where he'd been sitting. "Nice of you to finally come back. I suggest you don't abandon me like that again; I won't wait for you next time." The medic stated over the storm, then caught a better look at their faces. "What happened to you two?"

"Get on the damn bird before I leave you again." Deidara snarled instead, turning his glare on him and turning away from the kunoichi. Hinata just scooted back toward the tail again, looking shell-shocked.

"Whatever." Kabuto paused a long moment, then finally jumped up onto the bird—thankfully between them. He looked up at the sky, then asked placidly, "Is it really smart to be flying around in this kind of weather?"

"*Fine then.* You can walk!" The Iwa-nin actually looked ready to attack him. The silver-haired shinobi wisely shuffled back to sit next to the Hyuuga, keeping a wary eye on him.

"I have a feeling something must have happened."

"Oh, how intuitive of you, yeah."

"Don't direct your anger toward me. I didn't do it, as you left me behind. Still in Iwa territory, I might add. You're lucky I didn't get captured and ratted you out to some of the friendly Iwa ANBU." Kabuto said cheerfully. "But what's passed is past. Shall we keep going to your goal, then?"

"Shut up, Kabuto."

The medic pushed his glasses up further on his nose, the barest hint of a smirk gracing his features. "Whatever." He glanced downward, back into the forest, where a glint of metal answered his look. Then he settled back for a long ride and bided his time.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Aaaaaaawkwaaaaaaard. Obviously Deidara and Hinata have a few things to work out after that argument. The team is once more all together, and Neji is once more left in the dust. That is-if Deidara was telling the truth. What if he really is dead...? And what's this? Kabuto, you sneaky guy. Things must be coming to a head soon!

Clash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The flight was long, awkward, and silent. Well, as silent as it could be, considering they were flying *in* a thunderstorm. At least four times so far the bird was overcharged by static electricity, and the fifth time they actually crashed. (Well, the bird crashed, but Deidara made another bird just in time.)

"Do you even know where we're supposed to be going?!" Kabuto raised his voice over the thunder and wind, growling when his wet ponytail smacked him in the cheek.

"We're going to Amegakure, aren't we?!" Deidara shouted back, not turning around from his position on the jutsu's head.

"I sure hope that wasn't supposed to be a pun!" The medic replied irritably. "We can't fly in this kind of weather! We'll need to land and either take shelter or walk!"

The Iwa-nin turned to face him then, positively glowering. "You think I can't fly through a little thunderstorm, yeah?! We haven't died yet!"

"I am *so* glad you added the 'yet'!" Kabuto snapped back, glaring up at him. "I don't know what happened while you two were gone, but if it's made you suicidal, you don't have to take me—or Hinata-chan—down with you!"

"I'm *not* suicidal! But if you keep yelling at me, I may just do that!" He bellowed. The soaked shinobi then turned back huffily and stared back into the wind. Kabuto briefly considered throwing a kunai at him, for good measure and to see if he'd even attempt to dodge, but instead he settled back against the clay tail feathers to wait. Either they'd run out of luck and get struck by lightning, or the Iwa-nin did have some level of skill with his jutsu and they'd somehow (miraculously) make it through the night.

Looks like it's be *another* sleepless night for all of them.

The silver-haired spy turned boredly over to look at their resident Hyuuga again. Ever since they'd picked him up, she had been withdrawn and silent. Obviously something major really had happened between them, and frankly, the poor girl didn't need anymore trauma.

Kabuto had a feeling it concerned Neji, but it wasn't like he could ask about it. Deidara would most likely bite his head off, and no telling what an overly emotional Hyuuga could do. If he really wanted to find out this potentially valuable information, his best bet would be just to wait and see if they would talk about it—or get into another argument. The medic crossed his arms and settled back.

But after three hours of complete silence (aside from the storm, and the single time Deidara spoke, saying "We're making good time, yeah"), Kabuto found out that they *weren't* going to talk about it. Which really wasn't smart; closure was always the better route, even if it involved an argument, compared to avoidance. But evidently Hinata was too... scared, or ashamed, or perhaps confused to bring it up, and the blonde was much too angry. Or some other strong, negative emotion.

Looks like it's up to me to try to bait one of them, he thought sullenly. He had never liked face-to-face arguments, and especially loud, blunt ones. He'd always preferred the sneakier, more spiteful

kind of arguing. But no doubt neither of the other two would appreciate fighting like that.

But blunt arguments could only be brought about one way; a blunt remark.

Kabuto sighed, the sound lost in the storm. Hinata was still sitting next to him, turned away and curled up. It would be easier to try to talk to her, but she also had less of a chance of really *doing* anything. But Deidara was a bomb waiting to explode, possibly literally. The medic-nin had seen his exploding clones before.

"So... something must have happened concerning Neji, I take it?" Kabuto asked loudly, tensing up for the inevitable attack. Instead, surprisingly, the bird pitched downward, almost stumbling. Deidara turned around, eyebrow raised but otherwise looking passive. Hinata also looked up, her infamous white eyes large and tear-filled.

"...Yes..." She stated slowly, but her voice was lost in the wind. The medic could read lips perfectly and knew what she had said, but gestured for her to repeat herself anyway. She wouldn't do anything to start this argument, but the Oto-nin knew that eventually Deidara would snap.

"She thinks I killed him, yeah." Deidara called back to them, his voice carried by the wind. He was sitting cross-legged on the bird's head, arms crossed as well, and looking pissed.

Kabuto was only minimally surprised. Really, it made sense. Deidara was a shinobi, Neji was a shinobi, they were both skilled and arrogant, and they were both competing over the same girl—though for different reasons, he hoped. That would be the logical way to end it. But if that was the case, then why wasn't Hinata angry? Or grieving? He turned back to look at the sopping wet kunoichi, who only looked terrified.

"You're a shinobi. Wouldn't that just be natural?" He asked placidly, still struggling to be heard over the storm. Thunder clapped right after he said that, and another lightning strike came dangerously close to their earth-based transportation. Kabuto *really* didn't like this, but at the same time, he couldn't do a thing about it. (Aside from jumping, but from this height, even a ninja would either die or get fatally injured. So that wouldn't be a very smart move.) And even without the actual immediate danger to them, just being out in a storm wasn't very healthy. Even a skilled medic-nin like himself still couldn't find a cure for the common cold.

Deidara winced at his words, and looked away. Hinata's expression, on the other hand, darkened. "He's *not* a shinobi." She muttered, and her voice was lost again. But Kabuto hadn't lost the ability to read lips, and apparently neither had the Iwa-nin.

"I am too a shinobi! I'm a *missing-nin*, yeah!" He shouted, a little too loudly just to be heard over the storm. His blue eye flashed dangerously, and he was tense. Kabuto remained impassive and tried not to go into the instinctual defensive pose. "You're just mad because you still consider yourself wrapped up in Konoha rules and regulations!"

"No, no I'm not!" Hinata yelled back. Kabuto blinked slowly. Finally things were heating up. He wouldn't need to say anything more; now he could play the part he was born to play. Sit back, listen, and gather information. "You're not a shinobi, either!"

"WHY?! Because I can express these fake emotions?! Because I pissed you off?!" Deidara shot back, sliding off the head and standing on its neck. His hands were fisted at his sides, and his feet were spread. A basic taijutsu fighting stance, Kabuto noted. It was also an argumentative pose. Lighting flashed in front of them, backlighting him for a moment, and caused the bird to rock slightly.

"No! You're emotional; ninja don't have emotions! You're not a tool anymore!" Hinata's voice was rising in pitch and volume. In contrast, Deidara's was actually getting quieter, lower, more dangerous. She got onto her knees and stood up as well, but kept the distance between them. For now. Kabuto stayed seated. "You have no morals!"

"That doesn't mean *anything*, yeah! Look at you! You're getting pretty emotional, too, I'd say!" He snarled, taking a step toward her. The spy thought that she would take a step back, or at least would try to. Instead, surprisingly, she stood her ground and continued glaring.

"I'm not a ninja! I'm tired of jerks like you who feel the need to CHANGE EVERYTHING!" She screamed, and a split second later, thunder clapped to their immediate right. Again, the bird tilted to its side, but thankfully stayed airborne. "You're not a ninja, either!"

"I AM A SHINOBI, now shut up about that! We're both ninja, yeah!"

"You're too emotional! You can't have the best of both!"

"Well *you're* acting like a kunoichi, preaching to me about these rules!"

"I am not a kunoichi! I QUIT!"

Deidara took another step toward her, and shocked Kabuto and Hinata both when he withdrew a kunai from his pouch and flung it at her. She ducked, and it flew off into the dark night. "You *are* a kunoichi! That was aimed right between your eyes; if you weren't a ninja, you would've just died!" He snapped.

"NO! I quit! I'm not a kunoichi! I quit! I'm tired of all of this, I want out!" She screamed at him, reaching for her own kunai. But then the Hyuuga promptly realized what she was doing, and dropped her hand at her side again. White, Byakugan-less eyes glared fiercely into Deidara's blue one, daring him to comment.

But instead, he just relaxed. His arms dropped limply back to his own sides, and he took a half-step back. Tilting his chin back arrogantly, the blonde said, "You're right. You're not a kunoichi. You couldn't be if you just *gave up* like that, yeah."

"I *didn't* give up." She hissed back at him, voice barely audible. The wind whipped her navy hair around behind her, tearing it loose of its ponytail. Kabuto easily reached up and caught the ribbon before it blew away, wondering why they were even having this argument. It really wasn't about Neji; something else had happened between them. He idly wrapped the indigo ribbon around his finger, still watching patiently. "I'm just tired of the rules and of shinobi like *you*."

"I'm tired of worthless kunoichi like you. Too damn emotional for their own good, yeah." Deidara shot back effortlessly.

"Hypocrite!"

"Weakling!"

"Arrogant!"

"Fragile!"

"You're just lonely!"

The blonde paused for a moment. "So are you! But then again, that's alright, because only *shinobi*

aren't supposed to feel these useless emotions!"

"You're not a shinobi! You—you're just a wanna-be with an impossible dream!"

"You're an inbred little Leaf *pet*!"

"You're overconfident and weak and you left your village because you were afraid! You couldn't handle their standards so you had to make your own!" Hinata screamed, screwing her eyes shut and fisting her hands again. Deidara stopped, again, and merely stared at her coldly.

The silence stretched on for two more lightning strikes, one of them nearly throwing them all off the bird. Kabuto was about to speak up, when instead the Iwa-nin finally spoke again. "I'll let you in on a secret, yeah. I *am* a shinobi, an Iwagakure ninja. I am a jounin, and I have met every standard set before me. Nothing you can say will ever change any of that! You're just angry because you're still trapped in your Konoha mindset and you're jealous because I've broken free. You're jealous because I'm free *and* I've still surpassed others, yeah."

"You're just jealous because you're 'free'! You're alone, you're desperate, and you put on your façade of fake feelings to try to make people think you're human! You're right, Deidara. You *are* a shinobi. A worthless, inhuman tool. Only now you can't find anywhere else to belong, so you have to go to the Akatsuki!"

"You're jealous because I got this far, and you can't get anywhere! You're weak and you know it!" He shouted in a pained voice. Something she had said had struck home, and now everyone knew it.

But likewise, his last remark cut through her defenses. They both stared at each other for a long time, panting and ignoring the wind and rain. Kabuto slyly glanced from one to the other. Evidently *they* had come to the source of the problem, but he was still in the dark about it. And barely anything he'd heard in this argument he could use.

"You're jealous." Hinata said during a lull in the wind. The rain dripped off her face and onto the clay below.

"You're jealous too, yeah." Deidara replied, now perfectly calm (at least on the outside). "What are you jealous of?"

She looked down at her sandaled feet. "What are *you* jealous of?" The heiress repeated. After a few moments they locked gazes again.

"Your sincerity."

"Your freedom."

And then Hinata turned and sat back down beside Kabuto on the tail feathers, and Deidara turned and sat back on the bird's head, facing into the dying storm.

-.-.-

Deidara was half-asleep, straddling the bird's neck and leaning on its head. The storm had dissipated some time ago, thank the gods. He'd honestly doubted his skills to get them out of that thunderstorm if it had gone on any longer. (Not that he'd admit that to Kabuto.) The night was now

clear, the stars overhead twinkling merrily. A chill breeze was still blowing, ruffling his drying (and nearly freezing) hair.

The weather reflected on the team's mood. The storm between them was over, and now it was calm, if chill.

He had no idea whether or not the kunoichi and the medic were sleeping, but he really didn't care. It was bad enough having to stay awake now, for what had to be the third or fourth night in a row. (Not to mention how many fights he'd been in over the last week. That was understandably draining.) The bird drooped in the air, and the sudden drop woke him up fully again. Deidara sat straight up, looking around, and then rolled his shoulders. Gods, he was *stiff*. And his nose was runny.

Deidara sniffed, and wiped his nose on his wrist.

He really hoped he and the Hyuuga could maintain their previous relationship. While that particular argument was over and done with, some of the things that were said could leave a few scars. The Iwa-nin winced at a few of the things he called her, and hoped she didn't hold a grudge for too long. God knew he wouldn't.

A thin line of light appeared to the left of him, slightly in front of him. The shinobi tiredly noted that he must be traveling east-southeast, then. He was about to doze off again when two arms wrapped around his stomach, and a slight force pressed against his back.

"You're tired?" The kunoichi asked quietly, leaning on his back with her arms wrapped around him. Deidara relaxed again, having tensed up at the sudden contact.

"No, I'm good, yeah..." He replied dutifully. "Why aren't you sleeping? It's still an hour or two before dawn..."

"I couldn't sleep... nightmares..." She mumbled into his shoulder, almost shamefully. The explosives user had to wonder just how much of an effect that genjutsu had on her, and what kind of things her nightmares involved.

"That's too bad." He said flatly. "Is Kabuto asleep?"

"I think so..." She shifted against him, leaning against his other shoulder blade. "Deidara... kun... Why are you envious of my sincerity...?"

He sighed; he knew this was coming eventually. He had just hoped it was later rather than sooner. "You haven't ever felt the need to cover up your feelings or your expressions. When you say something, you mean it, yeah. It's admirable, really." Deidara paused for a moment, then smirked. "I know why you're jealous of me, though. It's pretty obvious. It wasn't just Konohagakure trapping you, was it? Your clan?"

He felt her nod against him. "Yes..."

And he hoped that that was the end of that. Deidara looked wistfully up at the stars as they soared underneath them. But then she spoke up again. "Deidara-kun... I'm sorry. ...I missed you. You're kind to me. ...Sorry..."

He kept his gaze on the stars, picking out familiar constellations he remembered seeing from Iwa. "I missed you too, Bya-chan." And, after what felt like an eternity, he admitted, "I'm sorry too."

"Did you really kill Neji-niisan?"

"No, I didn't." He paused again. "...Are you happy with him?"

She stiffened slightly, and he could picture her blushing. "Y-Yes... but that was our first kiss... I-I'm not even sure what it meant. Umm... are you jealous...?" She asked in a tiny voice. Deidara smiled to himself.

"A little." He felt her grip on him tighten, so he elaborated, "I'm just still waiting for someone for myself."

"O-Oh." The dark-haired girl sighed.

"Hey, no offence, but I never really liked long hair. Mine's long enough." He laughed and put his arm around her shoulders, bringing her up to sit beside him. She smiled shyly, twirling a lock of her long and dark hair around her finger. "Plus... it looks great on you, but I'm not a fan of dark hair. So alas, my princess Bya-chan, it would never work out between us. And I have a strict no-dating policy with teammates, yeah." For good measure, Deidara leaned backwards until his head was touching the bird's back. "Sorry, Kabuto-kun! It means that it'll never work out between us, either!"

The silver-haired ninja, who was awake after all, didn't look amused at the remark. He just glared sourly at them both.

"Oh, Deidara-kun..." The kunoichi giggled softly, bringing up a hand to cover her mouth as Deidara righted himself again. "I hope you find the right person someday, then."

The Iwa-nin grinned roguishly. He leaned over and kissed her soundly on the cheek, saying, "I'm sure I will. And even if I don't, I'll have my art and my partner, yeah. Oh, and that silver-haired jerk who's been following us." She just blushed crimson and turned away.

"Since you two have officially kissed and made up," Kabuto said loudly, once again drawing their attention, "I'd like to have you know that the sun rises in the east."

The blue-eyed blonde turned and gave him a look that clearly said 'duh'. The Hyuuga also turned, but her expression was more questioning.

Kabuto sighed, looking surprisingly stressed. "The sun rises in the east. That means that we are traveling southeast. When we began this escapade, we were in Iwa territory. Amegakure is south*west* of the Land of Earth. And do either of you know what is in the southeast? What land we are currently traveling over, heading toward the village of?" He ground out, glaring flatly at both of them.

"Oh shit." Deidara accidentally cursed again, leaning out over the edge to look at the thick forest below. "That storm must've blown us off course, yeah."

The dark-haired girl gasped softly, also staring down at the treetops. "We—We're in the Land of Fire..."

"Yes, we are. And if we don't get out of the sky *now* we're going to get spotted and attacked. Need I remind you that you kidnapped the heir of the Hyuuga clan, the most powerful and strongest clan in Konohagakure?" Kabuto snapped, crossing his arms sulkily.

"I can just turn us around—"

"No time. If we're spotted, you're going to have every available Konoha-nin on our tail. *Including* ANBU. We couldn't outrun that."

The Iwa-nin glared at him for a long moment, indignant at being interrupted. "Fine then." In a puff of smoke the bird below them disappeared, and was now roughly the size of his fist again. The trio dropped from the sky like sacks of bricks, the kunoichi giving a small scream at the initial fall.

But luckily, they were lower than the previous night, and Konoha trees are tall. Like good shinobi, they landed on the tallest branches, jumping down branch-to-branch and slowing their momentum. All three of them landed unharmed on the forest floor, Deidara stowing the miniature bird in his pocket for later.

They were now once again in Konoha territory.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara and Hinata seem to have worked out their problems and jealousies, but was it in vain? Because all three of them are back in Konoha territory, and with a kidnapped princess in their possession to boot! Can they sneak back out (southwest this time) before getting caught, or will some border patrol catch them? But then again, the Land of Rain is just next-door to the Land of Fire! If they make it out of this alive, they're home free! Right?

Simplest Solutions Are The Brightest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Sakura, GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!" Tsunade roared, planting her fists on her wide hips. She leaned over, toward the pinkette, which really wasn't a bright idea considering her... chest problems. One of the male chuunin attendants promptly fainted from a massive nosebleed.

"Bu-But shishou—" Sakura stuttered, putting her hands up in front of her as a pitiful defense.

"If I told you once, I told you a million times! You need to get out of the office! Get some fresh air! Go for a walk! DO SOMETHING! Just take a goddamn break!" The Hokage ranted, pacing back and forth. "I need a drink..."

"But Tsunade-shishou, there's so much work to be—"

"No! Sakura, you need a break! And if you don't take one this second, I'll force you to!" Tsunade growled, stomping back to sit behind her desk again (a good sign for Sakura). "Shizune! Bring me some sake!"

"F-Force me?" The chuunin was both curious and terrified. Most of it turned into terror, however, when the busty woman got that familiar evil glint in her amber eyes.

"That's it, then. You've forced my hand." Tsunade stood up again, grinning maliciously. Shizune appeared through the doorway at that moment, bottle of sake and the ever-present stack of paperwork for the Hokage. "Shizune! Give me that northern border patrol mission that no one would take! Sakura-san here needs a break, and I'm going to give it to her."

So that was how Haruno Sakura was assigned to the northern part of the Fire's forest. It would've been one thing if she was alone (in all honesty, she probably would've slept; the Grass and Rain were both neutral toward them right now), but unfortunately, Tsunade accurately thought that girls tended to gather when socially inclined. So the pinkette had unfortunately roped in Ino and Tenten as well in her 'mission'.

"Alright! I will scout the border youthfully and let no one past my gaze! Any enemy nin shall bow down to my power!"

Lee had come along for the fun of it.

Ino groaned loudly, flicking part of her light bangs out of her eyes. "Ugh... Forehead-girl... why'd you have to drag us out here with you? There's not even anything we *need* to patrol! Plus, aren't ANBU pretty much swamped in part of the northern border with that whole Ootogakure problem? They can take care of it..."

"Yeah, this isn't really a mission. Tsunade-shishou wanted to give me a 'break'. ...Actually I think she's just getting drunk right now..." Sakura sighed and hung her head, watching dully as Lee bounded from branch to branch in a manner that could only be described as youthful. "Sorry, guys... she thought that I'd need the company."

"Actually, I'm not really complaining. It's beautiful weather, and this is basically a walk in the forest, right?" Tenten said cheerfully, folding her hands behind her head. "No reason we can't actually turn this into a social walk. You know, gossip a bit, chat a bit, just talk."

"We could do that if we went *shopping*. Why couldn't Hokage-sama have assigned us a mission like that?! This isn't even a D-rank mission... it's more like a Z-rank!" Ino kept on complaining, though her voice was noticeably happier. "So... speaking of ANBU... I heard that you got an ANBU guy to replace Sasuke-kun on your team, Sakura." The blonde said slyly, grinning.

Tenten, who hadn't heard that bit yet, gasped and leaned forward to look around Ino. "What?! We haven't gotten anyone to replace Neji yet! Though Hokage-sama has been talking with Gai-sensei about it..."

"Well, we haven't even met him yet. She just told me that we were getting a replacement for some of the more dangerous missions, when and if Team 7 gets them." Sakura said lazily, trying to act indifferent. But it was obvious that she was just as excited as the other two.

Up ahead, Lee did a rather amazing acrobatic flip in the treetops, laughing as a squirrel started chattering at him for waking it up. "Hey! Sakura-san! Tenten! I'll race you guys to the border!"

"Isn't this supposed to be a relaxing walk?" The brunette weapons mistress was smiling, though. Obviously she thought it was a good idea.

"Jogs can be relaxing. Plus the border couldn't be more than a few kilometers from here, right?" Sakura grinned as well, looking at the other two kunoichi. "No reason not to burn off a few calories."

"Fine, fine, whatever. I'm game if you two are." Ino waved her hand in the air dismissively, faking an overly dramatic defeated sigh.

"Alright! We shall use our youthful energies to—" Lee crowed, but Ino cut him off as she yanked him down by the ankle from the branch he was sitting on.

"Yeah, we know, spandex-boy. Let's just set the starting line and go already."

"As an honorable shinobi, I will give the ladies a head start." The taijutsu master gave them a good-guy pose, but the three girls only looked indignant.

"Are you saying that we'll need a head start to beat you?"

"I'm thinking he's asking for it. Lee, you're gonna get your ass handed to you!"

"Whatever you say, but now you're challenging me, and I never back down or lose a challenge!"

Sakura counted down from five, and the three kunoichi were off like bullets. Lee waited ten seconds, then followed. Unfortunately for the girls' dignity, he caught up in about two seconds.

--.-

Hinata glanced around uneasily. This would be a very touchy place to be in; anything could happen. (And knowing their luck so far, it most likely would.) In fact, someone had just bounded into the edge of her Byakugan's range quite quickly. "Ah! Someone's coming!"

"What are we supposed to do?!" Kabuto hissed, scanning the area for any signs of a quick escape route. The sun had risen about a half hour ago, but even the dusty dawn light wouldn't be enough to

conceal three shinobi. "Can we outrun him?"

"At the pace he's going—three more people just appeared!" Hinata bit her lip, pushing her vision in that direction to see if anyone else was on the way. "Four shinobi!"

"Ahh!" Deidara yelped, looking around for some hiding place. "Oh jeez, after what I've done they'll disembowel me and torture me and cut off my hands and I don't want to die yet! I have to make it into the Akatsuki, yeah!"

"W-We can't outrun them—they've increased speed." She said nervously, pushing her index fingers together.

"Have they spotted us?" Kabuto asked sharply, adjusting his glasses. She shook her head, and he thought for a moment. "We can still get out of this. We'll just have to make sure that they can't spot us. Now, if they are patrolling the border, naturally they would look for invisibility or covering genjutsus..." The medic thought a bit longer.

"Sometimes the simplest ideas are the most brilliant!" The blonde suddenly halted and grinned. "We're in a forest; just *Henge* into an animal, yeah! We can hide in plain sight!"

"It's stupid, but I think it would be our best chance." Kabuto admitted, and in a puff of smoke, transformed into a small, dark grey housecat.

"A cat?! What are you doing? There are no cats in a forest!" Deidara hissed, before performing his own *Henge*. A small sparrow fluttered up from the puff of resulting smoke, and alighted on a tree branch above him.

"I'll have you know that this forest is practically infested with lost and wild pets. Do you know how many stupid pet retrieval missions I had to go on while undercover?" The cat hissed back at him, bristling his fur. "I need something that is quick on its feet and has available weapons! Better than a sparrow; you can't do anything."

"Hmm... true..." Deidara released the jutsu, sitting on the tree branch with his legs crossed. "Quick, Bya-chan, give me an animal, yeah."

"*Henge! Henge!*" Kabuto growled at him, swishing his tail as the blonde looked around for her. "Hurry up and *Henge* into *something!*"

Because the dark-haired girl had disappeared as well. However, a small, white rabbit was curled up beside a nearby tree, watching them with crimson eyes and twitching her ears.

"Aww, you took a bunny... Hey! I know!" One *Henge* later, a tawny furred fox was sitting primly, grooming his tail. He opened a gold eye, and grinned, perfectly foxlike. "I figured you would've taken a fox. Matches your personality better, Kabuto. Or a snake, yeah."

The cat spat at him, hackles rising. Hinata hopped over worriedly, smoothing her long ears against her cheeks. "Please... don't fight... We need to—"

Unfortunately, a spandex-clad form burst into the clearing at that time, and gallantly picked the foxy Deidara up. He squirmed at the sudden assault, whereas the feline backpedaled and continued hissing. "No, you won't harm his innocent creature, you feral cat!" Rock Lee declared loudly, shooping Kabuto away. Hinata shrunk away from him, shaking and terrified at being caught like this.

The poor bunny was further shocked when three of her friends from Konoha followed Lee into the

clearing, looking curious at the fact that the taijutsu specialist was backed against a tree by a cat. "Lee? What are you doing?" Sakura asked, bushing aside a tree branch that was in her way.

The white bunny gave a small squeal and ran into the nearest bush, watching warily from there. Hinata definitely didn't trust herself to be around the Konoha ninja; her anxiety could dispel the jutsu, and then they would all be in trouble.

It didn't even cross her mind to do that on purpose, to go back to the Leaf with her former friends. Because Deidara had been right; being a missing-nin meant *freedom*. And that was all she really wanted. Freedom to do as she pleased, to become stronger with, to live as she pleased.

"I just saved this poor fox from that feral cat! They were fighting, and I know how nasty those can be—" Lee, striking a hero-like pose, explained excitedly as he held out the irked (and *Henged*) Deidara. He was cut off, though, when all three kunoichi squealed and crowded around him.

"Aww! It's so cute! I haven't seen any fox in these parts in forever!" Tenten cooed, petting the fox on the head affectionately. She took him from her teammate, cradling him in her arms, tickling his stomach.

"What about that cat, though?" Sakura asked, trying to maintain an air of dignity while trying to pet Deidara at the same time. Kabuto looked annoyed and laid his ears back, swishing his tail. "It could be lost, someone could be missing it. We could make some genin's day a whole lot easier if we caught it and brought it back to Konoha now." Obviously the grey feline did *not* like that idea, as he bristled and tried to make a run for it like Hinata had. Unfortunately, the pink-haired kunoichi picked him up before he could get too far, holding him out at arm's length. "I don't see any collar..."

"If it is a wild cat, Sakura-san, you should put it down! It could have diseases or it could hurt you!" Lee cried in dismay from behind her. She waved him off while she continued to inspect him.

From her hiding spot, Hinata could tell that Kabuto was praying that his *Henge* would not be seen through. Unluckily, Sakura was an expert at seeing through illusions, and it would most likely only be a matter of time before she discovered it.

Deidara, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying the female attention. He was now in Ino's arms, admiring the view as she held him on one of her shoulders. The rabbit twitched an ear in mild annoyance; she knew he could easily see down Ino's shirt, but he didn't have to so blatantly. Hinata shook her head, though, mostly because it wasn't her spot to judge him. In fact, she should know better by know, having been a teammate of Inuzuka Kiba for three years.

"This little guy seems pretty tame, though. Really friendly." Tenten said, scratching him behind an ear. The brunette looked over at Sakura and Lee, before coming over to inspect the cat as well. "That cat doesn't look too happy. Maybe you should do as Lee says and put him down. What if he is just another wild cat?"

Sakura didn't look convinced. "He's very well-groomed, and there aren't any tangles or knots in his fur." She inspected his teeth for a moment. Kabuto tried biting her finger, but she just set him down after a moment. "Ah, you were right, Tenten. His canine teeth are too worn to be a housecat."

"But this guy, though, I like him." Ino called, still scratching Deidara. He still appeared just as pleased at the attention. Kabuto, on the other hand, quickly dashed over and joined Hinata in the bush.

"Now what?" He hissed in her ear, crouching down beside her.

"I don't know... He's acting too tame; Ino and Tenten might think *he's* a pet." She whispered back, twitching her nose. The close proximity of the bush's leaves to her whiskers made them tickle. "But what about you? That was a bit close, wasn't it?"

The cat just grinned. "It's the little details that make any disguise believable." He snickered quietly, curling his tail around his paws as he watched the fox absorb the attention like a sponge. "He's going to get us caught..."

"He really is a friendly little guy, isn't he?" Lee asked, visibly glad that Sakura had put the cat down. She and Tenten were now petting the fox again, cooing over him. "I wonder why those two were fighting anyway... But he seems really grateful that I saved him!"

"Yeah, he does. He really is friendly... do you think he's someone's pet?" The medic-nin asked, scratching him under the chin. Deidara happily accepted the affection.

"Who in Konoha owns a *fox*?" Ino asked skeptically, moving her out of her ex-ex-best friend's reach. "I think he's just a tame wild animal. Besides, I've always wanted a fox..." Deidara's ears perked up a bit, and he was now on the defense again. He couldn't afford to be taken to Konohagakure! "Wouldn't a fox fur coat look *lovely* on me?" That remark made him wobble on the blonde's shoulder, and he looked ready to either faint or be sick. Or both.

Hinata made the mistake of hopping out of the bush a bit to get a better view of Deidara, and Lee spotted her. The rabbit quickly tried to retreat again, but he scooped her up in his arms before she could do more than give another squeal. "Hey! Here's what Mr. Fox and Mr. Cat were fighting about! This poor bunny!" He called, holding the quivering animal out toward the kunoichi. Luckily for Deidara, a bunny was always cuter than a fox, and he was quickly forgotten. He slunk into the undergrowth, circling around and coming to sit next to Kabuto.

"Wow, Lee, you're just talented with animals, aren't you?" Sakura asked jokingly, cooing over the unfortunate Hinata.

He blushed at the comment, grinning. "Well, I do like squirrels better, but all animals are just as handsome and youthful as each other!" He chuckled slightly, handing the bunny to her. Hinata looked ready to faint.

"It's so pretty!" Ino gasped, petting her as she tried desperately to squirm out of the kunoichi's grasp.

"But... a white bunny? It's early summer. Is it sick?" Tenten asked. Hinata was very thankful that she had chosen to be an *albino* rabbit rather than a normal one, and squinted one eye open a little to demonstrate this and throw them off inspecting her. "Oh! It's albino! That's probably why that cat and fox were fighting over it; it couldn't camouflage itself in all these bushes..."

"Poor thing! It's probably been on the run ever since the snow melted!" Sakura cooed, holding the squirming hare still. "I wonder if Tsunade-shishou would let me keep it as a pet..."

"No, you work too much. The poor thing would starve before you had time to feed it." Ino retorted, taking Hinata from her. The disguised Hyuuga took her chance, though. She kicked the blonde with one of her stronger hind legs, startling her enough to make her drop her. The bunny was off the second she hit the ground, disappearing into the undergrowth.

It was almost four hours after the Konoha-nin left that the trio dared to move. The *Henges* had long since worn off, but like good little ninja, they concealed themselves carefully in the forest. No one else came along, thank the gods. Deidara was skittish, especially since they weren't as close to the Rain border as he has originally thought.

The dark-haired kunoichi sneezed, and he almost threw a kunai at her. Then he decided that the was way too wound up, and that they had better keep moving. If only so they didn't accidentally kill each other on reflex. "Come on, yeah. We've waited long enough; we're safe. Let's get to the Land of Rain." He stood up, dusting himself off.

"We should head straight east. It may take longer, but we should be safer." Kabuto glanced up at the sun to get his bearings. Deidara snorted, though, and rolled his eyes.

"North-east. We already met the north border patrol; we can avoid them again if need be, yeah." He stated, pointing his direction. The Hyuuga looked back and forth between them, frowning slightly.

The medic sighed, and pulled his gloved hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Deidara, for a genius of Iwa, you are pretty *stupid*. I thought your fears would keep you away from the north." The genius of Iwa snorted again and crossed his arms. "Look. What country is on the north-eastern border of the Land of Fire?"

"Hey, I'm a tourist here. I don't know, yeah."

"Considering you *overthrew* it, I thought you might remember. Hinata-chan, would you please be kind enough to remind him?" Kabuto asked patiently, looking toward the girl for some help.

"It's Otogakure. The Land of Sound." She supplied, biting her lip.

"And as you just killed Orochimaru and dumped his body on another Sannin's doorstep, don't you think there might be a bit of a fuss about that? I don't know, maybe a few ANBU sent up into Oto to investigate? Wouldn't they be patrolling the border in the area as well? ...Whereas straight east from here we'll go into the southern part of the Land of Rain." He explained, turning his gaze back toward Deidara. The Iwa-nin stared at him in response.

"We have less than a week left. We still need to search through the Rain. Hmm... I suppose we can go your way this time, yeah. Lead the way, Kabuto." He said after a pause. He held out his arm, pointing exactly east. The kunoichi beside him sighed minutely, not liking arguments.

Kabuto, on the other hand, just smiled graciously and nodded. Then all three of the missing-nin turned and headed east, on the last leg of their journey together.

-.-.-

A day and a half later, they came upon the border. On the Ame side, there was a fair-sized, non-shinobi village. They decided to camp outside of it, just in case, and to resupply the next day. The day after, they would begin their hunt for the Akatsuki.

The figure sat stiffly on a rooftop at the outskirts of the city, hunched over and arms crossed. The

moon rose behind the figure, backlighting it. Dull, reddish-brown eyes watched the silent, dark forest, watching the three shinobi below.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: They have finally made it to the Rain! Whole, intact, and more or less healthy. But it appears as if their entrance into the country didn't go unnoticed. Who will they have to fight next-if it is even an enemy! Next chapter, the three go shopping, and who knows what chaos that will create.

Artful Arguments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Frankly, the village was *much* larger than it had first appeared to the trio. But it was still blatantly non-shinobi. The people outside the eastern gate were dressed casually, with both Konoha and Ame fashions pervading the area. (There were, of course, also outfits from many other countries, both recognizable and just plain crazy.) Deidara looked more than happy to jump into the crowd, while Hinata looked ready to faint.

"Come on, Bya-chan!" He cried happily, looking around at all of the stalls and shops.

"Um, I-I don't like crowds much..." She whimpered, sidestepping someone who came too close for her tastes. Deidara looked thoughtfully toward her, but that kindness disappeared when he spotted a nearby shop selling scouting birds. The blonde was gone in an instant, leaving Kabuto and Hinata alone in the large mob.

"If he comes back with a bird, I swear I will cook it and serve it to him for dinner tonight." The medic groused sourly. Hinata correctly surmised that he didn't like crowds, either. He looked over toward her, his onyx eyes drawn toward the hitai-ate still tied around her neck. "That may not be a wise decision."

"Deidara-kun's still wearing his..." She replied evenly, still touchy about taking her headband off. Deidara hadn't gotten it off last time, and Kabuto wouldn't get it off this time.

Said medic looked like a wasp had just stung him in the throat. "Deidara's... still wearing his *scratched* Iwagakure hitai-ate..." Now that he said it like that, Hinata realized that that was a pretty stupid thing to do as well.

Luckily, the unsuspecting blonde came back then (birdless), saving them the time of tracking him back down. "The jerk wouldn't sell me a hawk, yeah. Said I needed some kind of license." He sighed, tilting his head to the side.

Hinata was behind him, restraining his arms while Kabuto was yanking off the headband before he could say anything more. The medic-nin quickly stashed it in his backpack while Deidara was wriggling away from the girl, looking like a kicked puppy at the ambush. She almost felt sorry for him, until he reached forward to grab her hands while Kabuto deftly untied her own headband from around her neck. "Hey!" She protested, yanking her wrists away from Deidara and turning to look at Kabuto.

"You can notice that I'm not wearing mine, either. Though we probably will be eventually recognized as shinobi by someone, we don't need to supply them with our home villages." He replied, and shouldered his backpack once more. "You may both have them back when we leave the town."

"It really is the best route to take." Deidara added with a shrug. Hinata sighed, and nodded in a defeated agreement.

"So... what will we need first?" She asked as she dodged past another member of the crowd. She really didn't like crowds.

"Soldier pills." The blonde said smugly, and Kabuto shot him a dirty look.

"I'll confiscate those, too." He warned, then turned primly back to her. "Definitely proper food, I need a few more kunai and a few medications, and I think we should all get a more appropriate change of outfits. Traveling cloaks, ones that will easily conceal weapons and hands. And because I've heard Amegakure can get cold sometimes." Hinata nodded again, believing that. Plus she had no problem adding another layer to her outfit.

The trio walked on, occasionally discussing another item or two to add to the shopping list, looking around at the crowds. Eventually they started a sort of game, trying to pick out who was a ninja and who wasn't. Surprisingly there wasn't a large number of shinobi.

"That guy over there. Shinobi or not?" Deidara whispered, pointing over to there left where a burly dark-haired man stood.

Hinata activated her Byakugan, and smiled. "Not. His chakra circulatory system is barely there at all."

"Actually, he is a shinobi. He must be a taijutsu user." Kabuto corrected, and the other two looked at him.

"How can you tell that, yeah?" Deidara asked skeptically.

"His chakra is at an even lower level than Lee's..."

"His Ame hitai-ate is tied onto his other arm." The medic said with a laugh.

"That was cheating." The blonde snorted, and stuck his hand in Kabuto's face, sticking its tongue out at him. "Hmm... well then, what about that woman over there?"

"This time I say no." The silver-haired shinobi pushed Deidara's hand out of his way and evaluated the woman. "She doesn't look like one, no hitai-ate, no visible bloodline limits, no weapons. Not a kunoichi."

"Actually... yes she is." Hinata giggled softly, glancing at the two men with her Byakugan. "Her chakra is active right now; she must have some sort of genjutsu around her to prevent people from recognizing her as a kunoichi..."

"Touché." Kabuto acknowledged. "What about... that man over there?" He sneakily pointed to a man walking toward them, carrying a backpack and a long wooden pole.

"I vote yeah. That stick could probably impale someone, yeah." The man noticed the three looking at him as he drew nearer, and they immediately looked away with not-so-innocent expressions.

"Excuse me," He said in a gruff voice, stopping in front of them. Hinata hurriedly deactivated her Byakugan, trying not to look like a kunoichi.

"Yes, sir?" Kabuto answered politely, putting on his best (which was flawless, as always) harmless expression.

The man grinned. Hinata looked at him curiously, wondering if he was a shinobi and they'd have to fight him or something. "Nice tits. Mind if I feel them?" That was *not* what she was expecting. Neither was the man expecting to be knocked out cold before getting his reply by two suddenly overprotective missing-nin.

"H-He ju-just-" She spluttered, crossing her arms over her chest. She'd heard numerous pick-up lines and other crude things before, but somehow she hadn't expected to hear any more while she

was on this crazy adventure. Deidara kicked at the unconscious man, while Kabuto wiped a few droplets of blood on his pants.

"We'd better keep walking before we get in trouble for that." He said calmly, and walked around the man.

"The nerve of some guys, yeah..." Deidara spat on the man for good measure, following them. "You think they'd be smarter than two mess with three ninja. Oh yeah, but most civilians can't tell we're shinobi without our *headbands*."

"You were agreeing with me half an hour ago..." Kabuto replied.

Hinata just let them argue, and followed mutely. She was surprised that Deidara *and* Kabuto had punched the man, knocking him out. Plus, while such crude things usually made her want to throw up, it was almost nice having someone else angry on her behalf.

-.-.-

It was high noon and the mandatory shopping had been done. Hinata had bought a new shirt to wear under her jacket (one with sleeves this time), and was now on her way to find something to eat. It had been agreed that once they'd resupplied on the necessities, they might as well spend the rest of the day in town, enjoying themselves.

"What is there to eat around here?" Deidara whined, standing on tip-toe to try to see over the mob of heads. Unfortunately, he wasn't much taller than Kabuto, so it didn't do much. "Ooh! Dango, yeah!" Once again, he disappeared into the crowd before either of the other two could do anything.

"Oh great. Deidara on sugar." Kabuto sighed, and continued looking for a restaurant. "He'll find us later. What would you like to eat, Hinata-chan?"

"Um... I don't really mind... How is Deidara-kun going to pay for his food...?" She knew she was out of money, and she hadn't exactly pictured either Kabuto or Deidara as the wealthy type.

"He has plenty of money." She gave him a questioning look, so he elaborated, "I know for a fact that he ransacked the Otogakure vault where we kept all of our valuables. He should have enough money to buy a small castle. Plus, no telling how many missions he's been on since he became a rogue."

"Oh..."

After nearly twenty more minutes of searching fruitlessly, the pair came across a ramen stand. Both of them were too hungry to not choose it for a meal, and were soon slurping up noodles in the storefront bar. Kabuto was sitting to the right of the wall, and Hinata was perched on the stool beside him. Other than them the place was empty.

A man sat at the stool two away from her, but she paid him no mind. It only meant that she and Kabuto couldn't discuss their mission any further. Instead, she said conversationally, "This is really good ramen."

"It is." The medic replied between bites. He glanced casually over toward the man sitting on her far right, and she shook her head. He wasn't a shinobi. Kabuto smiled slightly and turned back to his

soup.

"Hey, pardon me," Hinata stiffened and turned toward the man, worried that he was a shinobi and she was going to get into a fight she couldn't handle. Or someone that recognized a Hyuuga when he saw one. "I don't mean to be rude, but I have a question for you."

She nodded slightly, and she heard Kabuto shift slightly behind her. Knowing their luck he would turn out to be some ANBU or jounin...

"What can I do to get you to sleep with me tonight?" He asked with a grin. Hinata's jaw dropped; another lecherous jerk?! Then she slapped him as hard as she could across the face.

"Bastard!" Once a day was enough for her; she wasn't going to take such perverted and crude things said to her. The heiress stood stiffly up, turned to Kabuto, and said, "I've lost my appetite. Can we please go?"

"Yes, I think I'm done with my meal now as well." He looked distastefully at the man, and paid for their meals. He caught up to a furious-looking Hinata just outside of the restaurant, putting a hand on her shoulder to stop her. "You shouldn't let such things get to you. They're just ignorant, desperate men who have nothing better to do."

"I saw a sign for an onsen a little while back. I think I want to go relax... and I only want some female company for a little while." She smiled weakly at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "Let's just go find Deidara-kun first..."

-.-.-

The blonde Iwa-nin, meanwhile, was having his own stranger problems. "Look, I just want some dango, yeah." He crossed his arms, the hands in his palms already chewing. He would have to blow the place up if need be.

"I can't sell you any more, sir. There is a limit to how much one person is allowed to buy here and you passed that mark ten minutes ago—"

The cook was cut off as another man sat down at the counter beside the argumentative shinobi, saying, "Give me the so-called 'limit' of dango. As much as you can sell me." That caught both Deidara and the owner's attention.

"Uh... y-yes sir. Right away." After an awkward pause, he shuffled back to make more. Deidara stuck out his tongue at his back, and sat back down. He examined this newcomer, and wondered if he made that order just to annoy (and piss off) the man who dared deny him dango. The man was hunched over so much that it made Deidara's spine hurt just looking at him. He was wearing Suna clothing, but frankly, the Iwa-nin didn't know enough about the Land of Wind to tell if it was a shinobi's uniform or a civilian's. At any rate, it was red. The blonde twitched at the floor-length robe and hood, wondering, as he did every time he saw a Suna uniform, how they could wear something like that in such hot weather.

"What are you staring at?" The man asked in a monotone. Deidara immediately looked away. After a moment, he casually turned back to look at the man. He couldn't see his face, and it didn't help when the Suna stranger set his chin on the countertop (hunching his back even further), just far enough up so the blonde couldn't see his face unless he climbed over it and stood on the other side

in front of him. "You're staring."

"You're a Suna civilian." Deidara countered immediately, wondering what he was going to do with his bombs now that his mouths had spit them out.

"Shinobi." The man corrected, and the missing-nin went on the defensive. Even dango wasn't worth it to stay in the same area as a Suna-nin. But just as he was getting up to leave, the cook came back with a plate loaded with the sweets. He set it in front of the man, who in turned pushed it over in front of Deidara. "Eat it. I don't like dango anyway." He stated, in the same deadpan voice.

"Huh? Why did you order it if you don't like it, yeah?" He demanded, but was already cramming a bite into his mouth.

"Because anyone throwing that big of a fit over a few sweets deserves it." At those words, Deidara finally sat back down beside him, and decided that if they were poisoned or the man was going to kill him, at least he could die with a full stomach.

"Mm... thanks." He said awkwardly, craning his neck to try (in vain) to see the mysterious stranger's face. He said nothing in return, so the Iwa-nin returned to shoveling dango in his mouth. He set the miniature clay birds on the counter beside the plate, the clay lifeless and harmless. The man reached over and set his index finger on the owl's head, poking it. Deidara warily watched him, but did nothing past that.

"You're an artist?" The Suna-nin asked in a bored tone. "This is quite good."

"Are *you* an artist, yeah?" He asked suspiciously, though couldn't help grinning at the compliment. Maybe Suna ninja weren't so bad, if they bought strangers dango and liked art.

"I dabble with mediums here and there." He moved his head, finally, and looked up at Deidara from behind his tiny owl. Dark red hair fell into his eyes messily, but the man made no move to move it from his vision. His face was much younger than Deidara had expected; the thought struck him that this could be a chuunin, or even a genin. "Do you just sculpt?"

"That, among other things." The blonde grinned and finally relaxed. This was not the face of an elite shinobi, and he didn't need to be worried. Plus the man didn't even know that Deidara himself was a ninja! "I generally use whatever I need to make my art."

"I know the feeling." The Suna-nin nodded as best as he could, considering he was still resting his chin on the countertop. He boredly flicked the clay owl back toward its owner. "I think art can come in any form, as long as it's beautiful and eternal."

Deidara frowned. If that's what he thought art was, this guy needed this priorities rearranged.

"Yeah, it can come in any form, but that's not what art is. It's beautiful, but it's something that must happen for only a moment for it to be truly cherished, yeah."

"If it's only a moment long, how can it be cherished?" He retorted easily, raising his head. (The Iwa-nin noticed how short he was, too. The guy must really be pretty young.) "Art must be cherished and loved forever. It has to last forever."

"If it lasts forever, it will lose its shine and dull with age. If you can see it more than once, it can't be special, and it *can't* be art, yeah." He shot back, crossing his arms. The dango was finished, so now this art-challenged ninja had his full and undivided attention. "Art has to be fleeting, wilting afterwards, bright and full while it lasts. Have you ever seen, uh, fireworks?"

"Yes, I have. And while they're pretty, fireworks are *not* art." The redhead replied dully, though Deidara thought he saw a faint smile. But it could've been just a trick of the light.

"I agree, they're not, yeah. But they're like art. They're only there for a moment, and while they're there they're beautiful and... art."

"If it's only there for a moment, not everyone can see it and thus appreciate it. Art has to be treasured by everyone possible, and thus must remain forever in people's eyes."

"No, you're wrong. Nothing lasts forever, especially not art. Art vivid and wonderful and short-lived. That's why artists create more and more of it, yeah." Deidara grinned, loving this argument. It wasn't often he got into a fight over art, but when he did, it was always worth it. Plus, converting another artist to his ways was always a nice bonus.

"Ah, as much as I would love to debate this with you, I have to go. I have an appointment with a friend soon, and I hate to keep people waiting." That cut his hopes of converting and arguing painfully short. The Suna-nin slid off the stool, and set the money for the dango on the counter. Deidara stood up as well, saddened that his newfound artist and sugary-food-giving friend had to leave so soon. "It was nice meeting you."

"Uh, nice meeting you, too, yeah. Thanks again for the dango." The blonde noticed with a slight snicker that the redheaded stranger only came up to his chin; he *was* short. "Maybe we'll see each other around sometime." It was a blatant lie, but he didn't care. It was always good to depart on a good note.

"I think we shall."

Then he disappeared into the crowd. And Deidara was alone again. Provided he *did* have two bombs to spare. Snickering, the Iwa-nin felt sorry for the next guy to piss him off.

-.-.-

Hinata *finally* spotted Deidara with her Byakugan, after another half hour of searching. (The village really was a lot larger than they had initially suspected.) Kabuto fetched him, unfortunately by the ponytail. She winced at the hair pulling, but said nothing about it. Even with that, though, the blonde was beaming. "Hi! How did you two fare against the mass of non-shinobi?"

"Horribly. Hinata-chan's been hit on three more times since you departed, and she feels that she needs a break. We're going to the onsen." Kabuto explained monotonously, eyeing the chipper blonde. "And how did you fare against the masses?"

"I met the most amazing person!" He grinned broadly at them, after darkening at the mention of hitting on the heiress.

She smiled, though. The silver-haired ninja also smirked, crossing his arms. "Oh really?" She asked politely. "Was she nice?"

"Was she pretty?" Kabuto added, still smirking.

Deidara shook his head. "No, it was a guy. Another artist, yeah." Both Hinata and Kabuto were shocked at this, and their expressions must've showed it. The blonde looked like he'd been hit, then

stuck out his tongue. "Eww! No! It was entirely platonic! We just met, he bought me some dango, and we talked about art, yeah!"

The medic's face dropped into one of skepticism, but Hinata just giggled. "Ah, okay, but whatever, Deidara-kun. It's nice that you met a fellow artist."

"Yeah, it was pretty awesome..." He sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, still smiling happily. "So... the onsen, right? I'm sorry that I wasn't there to beat up those jerks, Bya-chan."

"You shouldn't worry about that. The last guy to say something is probably still unconscious." Kabuto said innocently as Hinata blushed and ducked her head. She just really did *not* like guys saying such things about her, based only on her appearance. Deidara looked approvingly down at her, then slung an arm around her shoulders.

"Well, just in case, now he'll have to face the wrath of three shinobi, yeah."

Luckily for the male population, no one further tried to hit on the heiress. (Well, one guy was obviously staring at her chest, and he almost got a clay bird to the face.) She had to admit that it was sort of nice to be protected like that, how Neji and Kiba and Shino would do. People who would do things like this for her just for the fact that she was a girl, not because she was a Hyuuga or the heir to the clan or some other inane reason.

In front of the hot spring's door, however, they encountered their first problem.

"Umm... y-you two... can't come in here." The Hyuuga whispered faintly, ducking her head and rapidly progressing a red to match Kabuto's hair tie. Both men opposite her only gave her a blank look. Meekly, Hinata pointed up to the sign above their head, which read, very clearly, 'WOMEN'S ONSEN. MEN FORBIDDEN.'

"...Ah." Was all the medic said, as he stared at the sign as if contained some deep and hidden meaning.

Deidara, on the other hand, just made a vaguely embarrassed face, more for the sake of looking like it would deter him than anything. Hinata sighed, and shuffled into the building, the door swinging shut after issuing a small stream of hot springs-heated steam.

"You can not honestly think about following her." Kabuto said immediately, turning to the Iwa-nin. For the blonde was already untying his hair, shaking it free, and grinning evilly.

"Like hell I'm letting Bya-chan go in there alone." Deidara snapped pleasantly, forming the seals for his voice-changing jutsu. The ex-spy just gave him a look of disdain, and then started forming his hands into their own signs. "...What are you doing, yeah...?"

"*Oiroke no jutsu!*" In a puff of nin-smoke, Kabuto disappeared, and in his place stood a rather busty, curvy, silver-haired kunoichi. Kabuto grinned savagely, readjusted the towel 'she' was wearing, and strode inside with a graceful swing of 'her' hips.

Deidara stared after, a blank look on his face. But soon his expression darkened into an evil smirk; he could copy that jutsu. He wasn't called a genius for nothing! Forming the same seals as he saw the medic-nin do just moments before, he shouted, "*Oiroke no jutsu!*"

A whistle from behind him. (Or, at least, he *thought* he was still a him.) The blonde turned to look over his shoulder, feeling his longer hair swish on his back. So he had copied the jutsu flawlessly, as he had expected... well, almost flawlessly.

Unlike how Kabuto performed, apparently the jutsu's default was to transform the user into a *naked*, attractive woman.

"Kabuto!" He yelped, and dove into the onsen's door. Thank the gods that there was a stack of towels right beside the door, and 'she' grabbed one viciously and wrapped it around 'her' new, curvy body. This jutsu... was bizarre. It was like an evolved version of his voice-changing jutsu, along with a pretty stable *Henge*. Someone with too much time on their hands must've created it, the blonde surmised.

He (*screw it, I'm still male*, he thought darkly) padded into the hot springs, following the route he thought Kabuto had taken. Sure enough, he saw the silver-haired ninja up ahead. The medic turned back to glance at him boredly, then turned and walked through another doorway.

Hinata just knew that one moment she was dealing with an obviously female, obviously Kabuto person and then she had the same problem, only obviously Deidara. The flustered kunoichi, who was now also only in a towel, tugged nervously at the bottom hem at it while looking terrified at her two escorts. "Ka-Kabuto-kun! Deidara-kun! Wh-Why are you two h-here?!"

"Oh, poor Hina-chan!" Kabuto giggled girlishly, patting the red-faced girl on the head. She pushed her long, silver braid over her shoulder. "It's Kumiko, remember? Oh, Dai-chan, poor little Hina-chan must be stressed!"

Hinata respectfully lowered her voice and used the aliases, but she wouldn't be thrown off that easily. "Kumiko-kun, Dai-kun, this is *illegal*. It-It's perverted and we could all get in a lot of trouble...!"

"Don't worry. We're just going to stay in our own little corner and keep our eyes closed, yeah. Aren't we, Kumiko?" Deidara grinned, closing his eyes for good measure. Kabuto nodded as well, and closed his eyes in addition. The kunoichi sighed, knowing this would end badly. Very, very badly. Chaotically badly. But she couldn't do anything short of ratting them out and getting all three of them thrown out.

"J-Just... keep your eyes closed. I'll be, um, watching to make sure you do..." She said lamely, and led them over to the corner where she made them promise they'd stay, facing the wall, eyes closed, unmoving, unthinking of the fact that they were surrounded by naked women (and her!), and eyes *closed*.

Then Hinata found her own dilemma.

She did *not* want to be anywhere near those two, especially naked, even if she was under the water. But she definitely didn't want to stay out of the water, and the towel would have to come off if she wanted to relax. And while she didn't want to be anywhere near them, she needed to be close enough for her to tell if they had their eyes closed or not with her Byakugan.

"So, Hina-chan, how are you liking the onsen?" Kabuto asked conversationally.

"No. Please be quiet, you two. This is embarrassing..." The navy-haired girl sighed again, foreseeing how this ordeal would go. Not very relaxing at all.

Then Hinata figured that at this point she just didn't *care*; she just wanted to calm down and soak in the hot waters. If they wanted to get arrested and discovered for the highly-wanted shinobi that they were, that was their problem. She just wanted to forget all of her problems. She slid into the waters, sighing in bliss.

"You two can't make this a habit."

-.-.-

That night, it was Kabuto's turn as sentry first. Hinata was dog-tired, and she didn't look forward to the probable nightmares and no sleep. (The nightmares usually came off and on while she slept next to Deidara. Some nights she got a decent amount of sleep, others she didn't.) The medic wandered off into the forest to patrol, and that left the ashen-eyed kunoichi tossing and turning and wide awake. (While the Iwa-nin snored softly from beside her, looking like a caterpillar in his sleeping bag.)

And the tossing and turning wouldn't stop. This was going to be another sleepless night, she knew. Her assumption didn't change after nearly three hours of the same squirming and half-asleep visions of the red-eyed demons from her nightmares. She tried scooting closer to the sleeping man, but even that wouldn't let her sleep. Defeated, she sat up, and decided that she could at least relieve Kabuto so he could get some rest. No reason for them both to go without sleep.

Hinata got up and put her new cloak on; the night was chilly. She buttoned it up to her chin and threw the hood over her dark hair, and activated the Byakugan to search for the medic. She spotted him to the north of their camp, standing near a large tree, next to some other small mass of chakra. The Hyuuga squinted at it, tiredly rubbing her eyes. Eventually she just gave it up to be an animal of some sort. No shinobi—or human being, for that matter—could compress their chakra circulation system into that small of a space. It was only slightly larger than her fist.

The tired girl trudged toward him, tying back her hair as she walked. Nothing else was moving in the forest, but then again, nothing else would be awake in the middle of the night. It would be easy to see someone coming in the dark; their chakra would glow like a beacon.

The curious mass of chakra had dim, barely visible strings floating out from it. Hinata furrowed her brow, then realized that it wasn't an animal; it was probably some sort of plant. Or possibly an animal standing in front of a plant. That would explain the vein-like extensions of chakra, and the ball as well. Hinata rolled her shoulders back and stifled a yawn.

Then her ears picked up the faint sounds of voices. Or, at least, Kabuto's voice. *He must be talking to himself*, she thought, *anything to break the silence*. Soon, she could pick out individual words, floating back to her in the still night.

That's... odd. That doesn't sound like anything I'd say when I talk to myself... it sounds like mission details. Maybe that's how he relaxes? It would only make sense that some of the more highly strung shinobi go over past missions to calm themselves down. Hinata knew of more eccentric things to do, at any rate.

"...yes, a day and a half into... Konohagakure... a day ago. Now... searching for... how many more?"

Then, Hinata was sure that she heard *another* voice. Which was impossible; her Byakugan saw nothing. Except the animal, but even *Henged* shinobi couldn't hide their chakra circulatory systems like that! She instantly quieted her footsteps and her breathing, creeping toward the scene cautiously.

The voice said, "Only one."

Kabuto... he's somehow talking with someone! He still is a spy! She suddenly realized, with a betrayed feeling. No... wait... there could be some reasonable explanation for this. I don't have to think the worst of him just because he's talking to someone... right?

"One? ...You? Interesting." Kabuto's voice said, and now she was close enough to hear everything being said. The Hyuuga strained her eyes, looking for whoever he was talking with, but there was *no one* there. He was alone, except for the mass of chakra. Which could *not* be someone; it was physically impossible for a human, no matter how small, to fit their entire circulatory system into that small space. It would mean cramming their organs and physical body into that tiny of an area, and that was impossible!

"Of course me. How could you think otherwise?" The other voice snapped.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about the implications of that fight." Kabuto chuckled quietly, and she saw him shift slightly. "...Oh, that reminds me. I found it interesting that Deidara found a new *friend* today. A fellow artist, evidently. Quite the coincidence."

"Shut up. You know I like to be prepared, Kabuto. Frankly the brat was disappointing."

"Ah... Sorry to correct you, but don't be fooled by his appearance or his personality. He is quite skilled, and I've seen what his bombs can do. And apparently he's developed an even *stronger* type of bomb, C2. I think bombs will win over metal and wood most days, Sasori-sama." The spy said lightly, and that dispelled any doubts Hinata had about his betrayal. Steeling herself, she silently withdrew a kunai and kept her Byakugan active.

Then the kunoichi stood up, glaring at the medic and whoever he was dealing with.

The only problem was... no one was there.

"Oh, hello Hinata-chan." Kabuto said innocently, offering her a small wave.

She frowned at him, and continued searching for whoever he was conferring with. Even the small mass of chakra—which, defying all odds and laws of nature *had* to be whoever it was—was gone. All of the questions she could ask, or remarks she could make assailed her mind. But it would be best to be blunt in a situation like this. Surely they couldn't kill her, not with Deidara sleeping only a little ways off. They couldn't cover that up. And if they did get into a fight, it would wake him up. The Hyuuga did one final check of the surroundings, and couldn't locate the mass.

"Kabuto... who's Sasori?"

The moonlight glinted off of his glasses, shielding his eyes from her view for a brief moment. When he tilted his head back up, he was smirking, and he had a positively malicious glint in his eye. "Hinata-chan... you shouldn't have asked that."

And then she felt the cold metal of the blade pressing against her neck, and finally found the mass of chakra again. Directly behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: It seems Kabuto was a dirty little spy, after all! And who is this 'Sasori'?

Is it another Akatsuki member, or is it an entirely new enemy for them to face off against? And what will happen to the princess now? All these answered and more in the next chapter of Dark Knight!

Start Wearing Purple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara awoke to a sunshiny morning, birds chirping, the weather pleasant, trees swaying happily in the slight breeze. The sky was blue, and the scent of flowers was on the air. It seemed like a perfect summer day.

Except something felt wrong.

Frowning, the blonde sat up, looking around. There was an empty sleeping bag next to him, and no sign of either the kunoichi or the medic. He continued looking, and even called out, "Okay, guys, haha, you've played your joke, yeah!"

It wasn't until about noon that he was really starting to worry. They only had a few days left to find the Akatsuki lair (or wherever they were), and no telling what other 'obstacles' were lurking around! Deidara scoured the village as well, but neither of them were there, either.

Then it finally crossed his mind that the Hyuuga may have ran off, back to Konohagakure. It wouldn't be hard for her to do so, and the thought saddened him tremendously. He knew it was unlikely that they could actually stay partners—or even teammates—but he'd hoped that she wouldn't just abandon him like that. He had thought they'd developed some sort of bond, a relationship. Hanging his head and looking like a kicked puppy, he headed back toward their camp to pack up his things and move on.

The Hyuuga was in the clearing, waiting for him.

Pleasantly surprised, but also somewhat curious, he shouted, "Bya-chan! Where were you? Where's Kabuto? I've been looking all over for you guys, yeah!"

She looked up at him, white eyes terrified. That caught him off guard, and made him wonder if something was up, after all. "Run!" She whispered, and then she attacked him.

Deidara ducked beneath her first punch, and rolled out of the way of her following kick. He back flipped to avoid the higher kick aimed at his head, and finally blocked her fist with his wrist. "Bya-chan?! What are you doing?"

"I-I can't control my body!" She gasped out, jumping back out of his own range. She still looked terrified, and that was probably the only reason he believed her. "It was K-Kabuto! He was working with someone—uh, Sasori, and he's somehow controlling me! Duck!" She shouted, and performed a roundhouse kick that would make most taijutsu specialists proud. (Luckily he'd followed her advice and ducked, just in time.)

"Sasori? Is he in the Akatsuki? Where is he, yeah?" Deidara asked, looking around for the enemy shinobi. No sign of anyone, just the girl in front of him. "But what about Kabuto? Where is that jerk?!"

"I... don't know!" She replied, shaking her head desperately. She charged at him again, and she landed a solid punch to his jaw. "Sorry! Oh, I'm so sorry! I can't control my body—but I still control my chakra, so I can't attack you like a Hyuuga! Your chakra's safe!" She babbled apologetically, while Deidara jumped back, rubbing his cheek.

"Well, what good is *my* chakra? I'm not going to attack you, yeah." He pointed out, running toward the far side of the clearing. She darted after him, but luckily, he was still faster than her.

"Just, um, just knock me out! Then Sasori can't use my body, and you can find him!" She suggested. The thought had crossed his mind, but he didn't dare try it. If this Sasori person was Akatsuki, no doubt that the simplest route like that would only complicate things further.

"No, yeah. I'm going to find this Sasori, and then beat the snot out of him!" He shouted into the forest, trying to bait the ninja.

The Iwa-nin hadn't expected it to work. So he was immensely surprised when a voice called back to him, "I'd like to see you try, brat." That surprise allowed the Hyuuga to land another punch, to his stomach, but he got out of the way before she could attack him further.

"If you'd come out of hiding, coward, I'll try—and succeed, yeah!" Deidara only missed a beat before retorting. His partner winced, and was forced to attempt another kick, but he sidestepped. Then the blonde got a wonderfully simple idea, coming from the delayed realization of the fact that he was physically stronger than her. He waited until she attacked again, then dodged around until he was standing behind her, and captured her arms behind her head in a full nelson.

She was immobilized, and that hopefully dispelled whatever jutsu he was controlling her with. Anyway, she couldn't exactly attack him again, and he felt her sag in relief against him. "S-Sorry... they caught me last night, when you were asleep. I c-couldn't warn you..."

"No worries, Bya-chan." He replied cheerfully, but kept his eyes peeled for any sign of his real opponent. "Now you've lost your weapon, yeah! Now what are you going to do?"

"I think I'll do this." Sasori's voice replied calmly. A foot came out of nowhere and crashed into Deidara's head, sending him flying and releasing the kunoichi at the same time. He skidded to a halt on the far side of the clearing, but got up quickly enough.

The sight that met him was yet another surprise.

She was still held captive, only this time by a gigantic *thing*, with some sort of long, metallic tail. The tip of it was pressed against her neck, keeping her still. Deidara looked down at the thing's face, but got caught halfway down by its outfit.

A black cloak. With red clouds.

"Akatsuki..." he breathed, then grinned savagely. "Of course. Should have expected this, yeah."

"You should have, but obviously you weren't prepared." The thing—Sasori—replied snappishly. He seemed to be crouched down on all fours, oddly enough, but the cloak obscured his hands and feet, so the potential Akatsuki had no idea what else this bizarre creature was hiding under there.

"What *are* you?" He asked, looking morbidly curious. "If you look like this, I wonder what kind of monster your partner would be, yeah..." The Iwa-nin looked around for any more ambushes, but Sasori just laughed.

"Oh, about 170 centimeters tall, long black hair, paper white skin, yellow eyes, snakelike appearance..." He stated sardonically, and Deidara's face took on an 'oh shit' expression.

"Didn't I already kill him? I have his head in my backpack—"

"Yes, you killed him. Served him right, the bastard. He was deviating from Leader-sama's plans,

fulfilling his own goals... That's part of this, brat. If you get in, you're staying in. There's no getting out of the Akatsuki once you get in." The thing's eyes darted up to glare at the blonde. The tail shifted slightly, almost relaxing, but Deidara knew he wasn't out of the woods yet. The Hyuuga was a hostage, and there was possibly still Kabuto to deal with.

"I'm just now nearing my goal of *joining*, yeah. Why would I want to leave when I got in?" He asked, clearing stalling. Sasori didn't seem to mind, or else he was stalling for something as well.

"...You'll just have to find out. *If* you get in. Right now, it's not looking too promising for you." He said mysteriously, and left it at that. Deidara pondered that for a moment (because honestly, when else would he have the chance to talk civilly with an actual Akatsuki member?). Meanwhile, he needed to somehow start molding some clay to *really* start this fight. This time, though, it would be two-on-one, with his side actually having the advantage.

The kunoichi had calmed down as well, surprisingly. Deidara regarded her for a moment, wondering what sort of plan she had come up with. It must have been something good, for her to relax while having an Akatsuki member standing behind her with his blade (tail!) at her throat. Did Deidara dare trust her enough to take care of herself, could he stand to put that much faith in her?

Why, of course.

Her Byakugan was active, and she was still thinking. So he needed to buy her more time. And stalling was something he was good at. "Of course I will get in, yeah. I mean, I've already fought five members, and you're my sixth. So I'm halfway done already, and I'm still alive and well, aren't I?"

"You think you're that skilled? No, you're not." Sasori retorted quietly. "We are all under Leader-sama's orders to *test* you. He thinks you have potential; that's the only reason you have a chance at all. If any of these were real fights, you would be a dead brat."

"Oh, you think so?" Deidara asked innocently, scuffling his sandal in the grass. "Well, I've beaten Itachi's genjutsu, Bya-chan beat Kisame's strength and sword, she's beheaded Hidan and Kakuzu... well, we really really pissed him off."

"Itachi's genjutsu actually isn't that hard to defeat, if you know how, Kisame's strength is his sword and it can be used against him, and Hidan is immortal. Everyone pisses Kakuzu off. And you seem to have a skill for pissing people off. You haven't seriously damaged any of the Akatsuki members, nor will you without proper training." Sasori's words were starting to get to him. It would only make sense that there would be some sort of skill difference, but he hadn't thought it was that much. Plus... would he really have to undergo *more* training once he got in? Deidara swallowed nervously, evaluating his remaining teammate.

She met his eyes, and he knew that whatever she was planning was ready.

The Hyuuga pushed the bladed tail away from her, and he saw a faint, bluish burst of chakra. The metal fell to the ground limply, unmoving and harmless (at least for the moment). Sasori tried grabbing at her leg, but she just jumped. Unfortunately, the thing rose his other hand, which appeared to be covered by some sort of weapon.

Deidara instantly jumped between them, simultaneously pushing her back, out of the way, and catching Sasori's chin with his foot, kicking upward with all of the strength he could manage. The weapon on his hand thankfully didn't go off, or at least didn't appear to. The Iwa-nin helped his partner up, leaping back across the clearing and out of immediate danger.

But evidently he possessed more strength than he had thought.

Because Sasori's head had come *off*.

The black-haired head landed with a thud on the grass below, rolling a few inches before coming to a stop. Both of the shinobi opposite the headless body stared in shock. Deidara was torn between disappointment (*he was that easy to kill?!), joy (I must be getting better, yeah!), and caution (it couldn't be that easy... something else must happen now...)* All those emotions disappeared in a puff of smoke, though, when he saw the stump of a neck.

Or rather, the lack of a neck. Where the head had detached, there was only a black hole, standing out starkly against Sasori's dark skin and the scarlet of the cloak's inside.

"Hn, how troublesome... I don't suppose you would allow me to repair Hiruko before we continue this test?" Sasori's voice suddenly changed, grew sharper and higher. In fact, it now sounded almost familiar to Deidara. The blonde narrowed his eyes, making a face.

"What's a Hiruko, yeah?" Subtly he nudged the kunoichi's foot with his own, but she just shook her head. So the Byakugan had let her down, but how was that possible? And *how* had it let her down?

The black hole of a neck issued a sigh. "I thought not. Hiruko," Suddenly, some sort of *hatch* opened on the thing's back, pushing the Akatsuki cloak aside. Something got out of him, closing the opening behind it, and stood behind the unmoving lump. "Is my favorite puppet. Without his head, I don't think it would be worth it. I rather liked his kunai launcher in his mouth." The voice sounded almost mournful, and it was definitely coming to whatever had crawled out of 'Hiruko'.

The dark-haired girl beside him gasped softly. "He's a puppet user... that's why I couldn't see anything with m-my Byakugan..."

"Well, his puppet looks sort of *dead*, yeah, and he said he doesn't want to use it anymore. What's that mean for us?" Deidara asked out of the corner of his mouth. (Frankly, he was starting to wonder if this was all some sort of bizarre dream or genjutsu. He'd never fought a puppet user before, and he had no idea that they made it a habit of hiding *inside* of their puppets. Or that the puppets themselves were so weak.)

"I-I don't know... I can't see anything... He doesn't have a chakra circulatory system, so it's hard for me to see, and he can mask his presence easily." She said apologetically, her white eyes darting back and forth to look for any unseen traps.

"Wait, he doesn't have *what*?! How can he not have chakra?" Yeah, this was definitely some sort of dream or genjutsu. Or karmic backlash for some horrible thing he must have done in a past life.

"The Byakugan is annoying." Sasori said tonelessly, still hiding behind Hiruko. "I suggest you deactivate it before I cut out your eyes." His figure (at least, Deidara hoped it was him; he didn't want to fight anything that wasn't the actual Akatsuki member) stayed hidden, and was probably setting up some trap or jutsu.

"You'd have to get through me first, yeah. And without chakra, good luck with that!" The Iwa-nin declared, standing protectively between them.

"The Hyuuga stated that I don't have a chakra *circulatory system*. If I didn't have any access to my chakra, how could I control my puppets? How could I do this?" Suddenly, the severed head of the puppet flew up and launched itself toward Deidara. A blade appeared out of the bandana hiding its mouth. The surprised ninja caught it, though, but just barely; the blade's tip was less than an inch

from his throat. The blonde grinned shakily, having stopped the attack and taking away Sasori's element of surprise. But instead the hidden puppet user stated, "I told you I liked the kunai launcher in Hiruko's mouth."

His eye widened, and there was a mechanical click. The blade shot forward and buried itself in his neck, spurting blood everywhere as it slid out the other side, burying itself in a tree on the far side of the clearing. The kunoichi screamed as the body—still holding the puppet's head—fell down lifelessly. And then promptly decomposed into a pile of clay.

Deidara burst out of the ground in front of Hiruko's headless body, a clay bird under his feet and propelling him upward. He zoomed in with his scope on the real Sasori, or at least the figure he took to be him. As he did that, the explosives expert scattered down a rain of miniature spiders, having them brought to life in puffs of smoke and scuttle toward the Akatsuki member. Predictably Sasori jumped out of the way, before either the spiders or Deidara's scope could lock onto him. All he saw was a flash of black fabric with a red cloud.

The Hyuuga suddenly found herself standing in front of the puppet user, within arm's reach. So when the blonde turned back to look at her, she was in the usual Hyuuga *Juuken* stance, striking with chakra and fists alike as Sasori ducked, dodged, and block without any of the glancing hits she scored doing any damage. He thrust forward with a kunai, and she ducked under his arm, grabbing a handful of the clay from Deidara's clone. Molding it with one hand, she backpedaled to avoid the continuous onslaught, until finally she could force her chakra into it and threw the pigeon into Sasori's face.

"*You?!!*" He disappeared in a cloud of nin-smoke, and Deidara spotted him again as he landed on Hiruko's back. Finally he got a proper look at the Akatsuki member—and he gasped mutely. Sasori had messy scarlet hair, falling into his dull, reddish-brown eyes, sticking up at odd angles. His face was young and innocent-looking, yet at the same time, he somehow pulled off the dark expression at having discovered that the kunoichi knew clay techniques as well.

It was the same art-loving, dango-giving, jaded, redheaded Suna-nin from yesterday.

"*You!*" Deidara repeated him, pointing down with jaw dropped. Mostly it was shock that he had misjudged the man so easily and so completely incorrectly; he'd taken him for a genin! Genin were *not* at the Akatsuki level! Sasori looked up at him, his expression smoothing into one of disinterest. The Iwa-nin glared back, feeling a little betrayed. (And disappointed at the fact that he wouldn't be the only art-nin in the Akatsuki unless he killed this guy.)

"Yes? ...Ah. I see you recognize me." His mouth quirked on one side in a half-smile, half-smirk. "Nice to see you again. I see your jutsu reflects your view on art. And as you can see," the redhead spread his hand toward the deceptively unmoving body of Hiruko, "So does mine."

Sasori's childlike face kept him looking innocent and calm, and no doubt it would've disarmed a lesser shinobi. Deidara, on the other hand, knew two could play the disarming game. "Yeah, fancy meeting you here. So it's Sasori? Thanks for not poisoning my dango yesterday." He said simply, having his bird fly down closer toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that his Hyuuga partner was looking awed that this was the man that he'd met yesterday.

"Actually, it was poisoned." He smiled without humor. The blonde winced internally. "But it was watered down. It was only enough to knock you out soundly for the night. Kabuto and I needed to have a 'chat'."

Then the angelic looking shinobi threw two kunai at him, but Deidara saw the third he slipped into the barrage, and ducked all three. Unfortunately, somehow they switched direction; one of the

knives caught him in the back of the shoulder. Swearing, he hastily yanked it out, and threw it back, catching the puppet user in his own shoulder.

"That kunai, on the other hand, *wasn't* watered down." Sasori stated placidly. He didn't seem to mind the kunai buried in his shoulder, and somehow the wound didn't appear to be bleeding any. "With that simple wound, I've won the fight."

"If it was poisoned," Deidara retorted, while his heart was pounding in his ears and his body was starting to go numb, "Then you're screwed, too, yeah."

"Do you think a scorpion can feel its own venom?" The Akatsuki member hopped off of his puppet's back, and walked slowly over toward his opponent. The explosives user unfortunately had to have his bird land as well, because the poison threat wasn't any bluff. Deidara could feel it starting to numb and paralyze his body, and already his arm connected to the wounded shoulder was beginning to get sluggish. He hadn't come in contact with many poison users during his rather short lifetime, but one thing he did know was that poison traveled through the bloodstream. Already his shoulder was dribbling blood (that was probably slowing it), and another open wound should probably either flush it out of his system or at least slow it to the point where he could still fight.

But then he felt the blade pierce his upper arm, and looked up in shock at his Hyuuga partner. She looked down at him almost dispassionately, but she pulled out the kunai and smiled weakly. "The poison was traveling down your arm's bloodstream first, so a wound right there should bleed most of it out." She explained apologetically.

"Touching." Sasori deadpanned, halting a few paces from the pair. "You've managed to prolong your life for the moment. But you've forgotten about *me*." The kunoichi frowned, and moved to stand between him and the blonde. Instead of attacking, though, he grinned maliciously. "Every one of my weapons is poisoned. I have an arsenal of more puppets than you could imagine, and hidden weapons you wouldn't even dare to dream of. In short, Deidara, you and the Hyuuga are going to die. And you are both going to die by *my* art."

Deidara just grinned from behind her. "Not unless you die by my art first, yeah." He held up his hand in a half-sign, shouting, "*Katsu!*" The bird he'd been using before as transportation, which Sasori had walked right by and stood in front of, exploded. But the strangest thing was that his voice wasn't alone; the Hyuuga had shouted it as well, and a small clay bird between them detonated as well.

Smoke instantly pervaded the clearing, shielding the three from each other. Naturally the one with the Byakugan would have the advantage here... unless Sasori was planning something else. Deidara glanced around in the smoke and dust uneasily, but he couldn't see anything, even with his scope. But then—there—there was a sudden movement to his left. He attacked it, and found himself locked in close-range combat with the lone Akatsuki member.

Deidara aimed a fist at the shorter nin's head, but he ducked and countered with his own uppercut. The blonde jerked his head backward out of the way, and turned it into a back flip to try to kick Sasori in the chest. That missed as well, but when Deidara landed, Sasori's next kick didn't. But like a good shinobi, he caught his opponent's ankle, and kept his leg immobile while throwing off his balance. But it seemed that the redhead was also a good shinobi; he yanked it out of his grip by jumping and spinning. The two leapt away from each other, and finally noticed the other's trap.

The tip of Hiruko's tail-like appendage was pressed between Deidara's shoulder blades, and he grinned ruefully. Sasori was staring listlessly at the clay spider on his chest, unresponsive to the bird nestled in his hair.

"Should we see whose art would win?" The Iwa art-nin asked.

"Mine would, naturally." The Suna art-nin replied easily, looking back up at him. "The only problem is, the Hyuuga kunoichi has figured out that her own *Juuken* chakra strikes will temporarily disrupt the chakra strings I use in my puppeteering jutsu. But she only has two hands. Please tell her not to do what she's thinking of doing; she may stop Hiruko's tail but she can't stop a rain of poisoned senbon."

Deidara hadn't noticed her standing behind him, poised to strike down the blade pointed at his back. He slowly turned his head to look at her, but her determined gaze was on the metal links in front of her.

"Oh, is she going to sacrifice herself to save you?" Sasori asked in a bemused voice. "Kunoichi are such emotional creatures."

"Don't do it, yeah. Sasori won't kill me while he has my *art* on him." The Iwa-nin warned, watching her intently. She still didn't reply, or move. But her expression was slightly pained, and he had seen that look on her face before; it was right before she was going to make a decision he wouldn't like.

After an eternity in which none of the three moved, she said, "I can do this."

-.-.-

Despite her words, Hinata felt anything but confident. Not only was she leagues below Sasori (and Deidara, for that matter), he had already figured out a way to trick her Byakugan and didn't seem fazed by her *Juuken* attacks. All of her Hyuuga training and taijutsu seemed pretty useless right now... except for one particular technique.

Neji had taught her the basics of it, and she'd practiced it, but she had yet to perfectly perform it. And that was in *safe* conditions, under no pressure... this was the exact opposite of that. This was an actual life-or-death situation. And it possibly wouldn't be only her death, either; one false move and she could drag Deidara down with her as well.

Decisions like this her whole being rebelled against. A fragile kunoichi like her wasn't made for pressure like this, and she'd never had the opportunity to really have someone else's life be in her hands. (Though whether it was her partner's or their enemy's, she wasn't sure.) But in a masochistic sort of way... it felt nice. Yet again, her missing-nin partner had handed to her one of life's freedoms that had nothing to do with where she came from or how others saw her.

Hinata focused her Byakugan on the faint lines of chakra in the puppet's tail. She could do this. She could handle this. (Frankly, she was lucky that Sasori would retaliate with projectiles, even if they would be many and poisoned.) The heiress took a deep, calming breath, and checked her and Deidara's chakra levels. They were both alright, considering they were mid-fight with ninja from the infamous Akatsuki.

"You will die if you attempt this." Sasori warned once more, returning his bored glare to the clay spider attached to him. He seemed very calm, considering if this desperate plan worked, he would be so many ashes. Or maybe he had something else planned, or some trick or skill hidden up his black sleeve. She wished that she could see what he could be hiding, but the redheaded man was

just the small mass of chakra, tossing the laws of nature and shinobi casually out the window.

"Y-You will die if this works." She replied, trying to sound as calm as he looked. (Whereas Deidara looked as nervous as he probably felt.) Hinata turned back to the puppet's headless body, wary of any other traps it could be concealing. She had seen Kankurou's puppet work in her first chuunin exam, and he was a genin at the time. Sasori wouldn't be bluffing when he said that there were traps and weapons concealed they couldn't imagine.

The kunoichi took one last breath, and then reached forward to gently tap the links with her chakra-filled hand. The chakra strings holding it up failed and it fell to the ground with a metallic clunk.

Then all hell broke loose.

Deidara leapt away from her, detonating his bombs a split second after Sasori jerked his hands forward. One of them he directed at Hiruko, while the other tore the spider off his chest (a moment too late). The cloaked puppet sprang to life once more, fulfilling the redhead's promise of a rain of senbon. Hinata squeezed her eyes shut and forced her chakra outward, spinning with a *Kaiten*. As her chakra shield miraculously saved her life (and it was the first time she successfully did it, too!), Sasori had disappeared in the smoke, as had the Iwa-nin with a flying tackle.

She came out of the *Kaiten* somehow unscathed, and carefully darted around the discarded senbon around. The puppet appeared lifeless, so she edged away from it as well, and turned fretfully to the clearing smoke.

Deidara was standing, whole and unharmed. She sighed with relief, and started to make her way over to him. But then the smoke cleared completely, and she saw why he was standing so still. *Somehow* the cloaked shinobi had survived a bomb to his *head*, and had his hands raised in front of him. Sasori twitched his finger, and the Iwa-nin stiffly rose his arm. Hinata recognized the jerky way his body moved; the puppet user had turned him into his marionette!

"That was a bold move. For both of you." Sasori was saying, smiling up at the taller shinobi. "How did you know I would survive the blast?"

"I saw you take the spider off. You would've been fast enough to get away from my other bomb, then." Deidara replied sourly, raising his other arm as the enemy rose his hand.

"Ah, sounds logical, but you are underestimating yourself. I was only able to get your 'art' off my chest. The bird detonated on my head, as you originally planned." He smirked smugly, which contrasted with his bored stare. His new puppet just gaped at him.

Hinata watched worriedly; this time, there was nothing she could do. Hyuuga skills can only take one so far... But then she spotted the remaining pile of clay her partner had discarded earlier.

"Are you... damn, are you immortal, too?" The blonde swore, his shocked expression darkening into a glower. If looks could kill, the fight would have been over then and there.

Sasori just cocked his head and smiled, closing his eyes. It made him look much younger, much more innocent and harmless. Almost angelic. "Yes, I am." His face immediately switched into an irritated look, however, as the Hyuuga walked slowly over to them. "You can't do anything this time, Hyuuga."

"That's a lie." She said, and offered her own innocent smile. Deidara, on the other hand, recognized his jutsu and he brightened. Unfortunately, their enemy noticed this, and he caught on. The redheaded Akatsuki member cursed and leapt away, landing lightly on a tree branch and leaving

Deidara to fend for himself.

Hinata's clay clone exploded, a moment too late to do any damage to him. From the bush she was hiding in, she panted, cursing her timing mentally. Plus, *Jibaku Bunshin* were a *lot* more taxing than the regular *Kage Bunshin* she was used to (and even then, she wasn't all that good at those). The attack sapped her chakra, and it didn't even work...

"You are an annoying little girl." Sasori called down from his spot on the branch, and for the first time since her capture, actually paid attention to her rather than her partner. She winced, and tried to control her breathing as she stood up and looked up at him. "And you don't even have the decency to come up with your own form of art."

"Hey, she's just following the best example of *true* art she's seen, yeah." Deidara replied for her, though his words were harmless; he was still controlled by the Akatsuki member.

"Those little fireworks are *not* art. You constantly have to replace them and they don't last. My art, on the other hand, only needs to be created once and it lasts forever." He replied coolly, brown eyes darting over momentarily to the Iwa-nin. But then he returned to staring at Hinata. (With a small note of surprise, she realized that she hadn't seen him blink during this whole fight.)

"What are you...?" She asked before her partner could retort. She had been wondering that since she first spotted the bizarre mass of chakra that he seemed to be. He wasn't fazed by attacks or pain, he didn't blink, and even without chakra in his system he could create and utilize jutsus. The heiress had always known that there were some strange shinobi out there, but this man had crossed the 'strange' line a few kilometers back.

Sasori merely smiled slightly. "An artist."

And then, just as she picked up the small twitch of his fingers with her Byakugan, Deidara darted forward and attacked her. She ducked beneath his first punch, only to get kneed in the stomach. All the air rushed out of her lungs, but the Akatsuki member's new puppet only rose his other leg and kicked her away from him in the side. Hinata scrambled back up, spinning out of the unfortunate Iwa-nin's reach as he tried to grab her hair.

Sasori just stood there, nearly unmoving, except for his hands.

Hinata was drained. She had nearly no chakra left, especially after her first-ever *Kaiten* and *Jibaku Bunshin*. She only had about enough to temporarily disrupt one or two of the puppet master's strings, and that would only buy them a few seconds of time. And now she was forced to fight against Deidara, not to mention whatever other nasty things he had hidden in his other (actual) puppet.

The dark-haired kunoichi danced away from the blonde's range, just barely missing his attack again. She surveyed his chakra levels; they were still nearly full. But that would only make sense; he'd only used a few bombs and no other jutsus. She also noticed that he still had plenty of clay in his bag. Right now, their best bet was just to free him and let him take over.

A supporting role, yet again, the heiress thought ruefully, smirking to herself.

But unfortunately, Sasori wouldn't just let Deidara stand still long enough for her to break the chakra strings. He back flipped out of the way with a hasty apology, and ran away when she chased after him. Only this time, the roles were switched. But he was still faster than her, so she lost that chance to free him.

"Duck!" He shouted, and she ducked just in time to miss his kick. "Sorry, yeah!" Hinata also avoided the following elbow, and then saw her chance. The faintly glowing blue strings leading back to Sasori were exposed, and she cut through all of them with her own chakra-filled hand. The newly-freed Deidara stumbled forward, surprised at the sudden liberty.

But it was evident that the Iwa shinobi had had enough of the playing around. He didn't stop long enough to thank her or celebrate; he darted toward Sasori with a drawn kunai instead. The redhead stayed motionless, almost *allowing* Deidara to catch him.

He didn't look pleased, however, when Deidara lifted him up by the front of his cloak, pulling his face close to his. Angrily grinning, the blonde artist growled, "So do you think it's *amusing* to make us fight against each other, yeah?"

"Yes." Sasori replied calmly, though he still look displeased at their proximity. "Almost as amusing as this." Then he took the blade hidden in his sleeve and stabbed Deidara through the chest. Hinata gasped; she hadn't seen the man take it out! Had it been hidden in his sleeve the whole time? No, that would have been impossible with his arm movements, but then *where* did he get it? "Drat. Missed the vitals."

The Iwa-nin's blue eye flickered down to the knife sticking out of his chest. Sasori grinned up at him, looking gleeful and smug. Deidara spat a mouthful of blood in his face, but still the redhead did nothing.

"You're going to die now. This annoying fight is *finally* over." He stated, and let go of the blade's handle, leaving it in his body.

"It is." Sasori looked perturbed at Deidara's words, but didn't say anything. "Look down, yeah." Reluctantly, the Akatsuki member did so, and his normally lidded eyes widened. A clay scorpion was locked onto the fabric right above his heart, stinger drawn back and ready to detonate. "Shall we find out why you were more desperate to save your heart rather than your head?" It was the blonde's turn to act smug, even with the blood running down his chin.

Hinata quietly slipped over closer, Byakugan still active, though starting to fade. Her chakra was depleted, but she could still do straight taijutsu if somehow this didn't work.

"How did you know?" Sasori asked flatly. His expression had darkened from his angelic smile to one of pure hatred.

Deidara's, on the other hand, brightened into a grin of sheer joy. "I didn't. You just confirmed it for me, yeah." If possible, the redheaded Suna-nin's face further darkened. "You underestimated me, and my *art*. That was your downfall. Just like you use your young face to fool people, my personality does that. Only I didn't fall for yours, yeah."

Hinata finally relaxed. It would be impossible to escape from that at this point. They had won another Akatsuki fight. She deactivated her bloodline limit, exhausted from its steady drain on her system. (She was going to need another trip to an onsen after this.)

Sasori glared up at him. "Heehee, bye-bye, yeah!" Deidara chirped, and raised his free hand, forming the detonating sign.

Until a hand reached out and yanked the blonde forcibly back by the ponytail. The Akatsuki member's expression lightened into annoyance, and he turned his flat glare on whoever was behind Deidara. Hinata's head snapped around to look at this disturbance as well, as her partner flailed, trying to maintain his balance.

"*Finally.*" Sasori muttered under his breath.

"No." Uchiha Itachi stated, yanking the blonde further away. The Hyuuga flinched and looked away from him, remembering their last run-in. Unfortunately, her white eyes turned to the Uchiha's partner, who was also an unwelcome addition to the scene.

"Bad boy. No killing the redhead." The shark-like man grinned, shaking his finger in Deidara's face. The Iwa-nin spat blood at him, too, though he missed. Itachi restrained him, keeping his hands apart, stopping him from detonating the bomb and at least killing *one* of the members.

Hinata also felt her arms suddenly get jerked back behind her, stopping her from any jutsus or attacks (not like she could have done much, however). She looked nervously up into the fuchsia eyes of Hidan, her heart nearly stopping. *Wh-Where are they coming from? Are we going to die now, after everything we've accomplished...?!* she thought in a panic. The silver-haired immortal just grinned down at her, and set his chin on the top of her head. "Well well, I hadn't expected you to make it this far. Apparently the bitch is more than just a pet, eh, pretty boy?" He asked Deidara rhetorically. The blonde glared daggers in reply.

"Now what, yeah? Are you going to kill us?" He demanded hotly, shifting his glare to each member in turn. Hinata glanced out of the corner of her eye and spotted Kakuzu, too, which only confirmed her fears. They were going to *die*.

"Took you all long enough. I hate to be kept waiting." Sasori complained sourly, trying to detach the scorpion from his cloak.

Itachi spared him a cold look, then gestured to the blade still sticking out of Deidara's torso. "Is this yours?"

"Of course it is." The redhead retorted, finally getting the bomb away. He threw it at the Uchiha for good measure, and crossed his arms.

Then, however, four more shinobi joined them, each in a swirl of black and red cloaks. Deidara, on reflex, attempted to kick the nearest one, but his leg went cleanly through the shadowy character. His glare darkened, and the attacked shadow glared down at him with grey eyes. Hinata noticed that the other three seemed to appear just as intangible as that one; they weren't actually *here*. (Oh, good, that meant that they only had to fight *five* Akatsuki members.)

"Decent reflexes." The shadow commented in a masculine voice, looking down at Deidara (who just attempted to kick him again). "But I suggest you don't try to kick me again. Next time you will be killed."

"Because that's different from what you're going to do to us, yeah." He responded, sticking his tongue out. Itachi smirked faintly, looking amused at the antics of the doomed.

"Keep complaining and I *will*." The shadow shot back, his grey eyes narrowing. "No one disrespects the leader of the Akatsuki."

"Oh, so the illustrious Leader-sama is a *shadow*. How frightening." Apparently when trapped, Deidara got hostile.

Hinata frowned slightly, and hoped he didn't take it too far. But her sight of her partner was cut off, however, when one of the other shadows stepped in between them. Yellow eyes peered down at her, from between two large *things* coming up out of the head or shoulders. She shrunk back, and had the same train of thought as she did when she met Sasori: *what is it?*

"*He has a partner?*" The voice was also male, but it was deep and gravelly. She tried getting away, but Hidan held her firmly, snickering. "How... interesting. What will you do, Leader-sama?" It was undeniably the same shadow talking, but somehow the voice *changed*. By now Hinata didn't even want to know what the thing was.

"Deidara-san is the one who killed Orochimaru. He's the one who will replace him." The so-called leader said indifferently, keeping up his glaring contest with Deidara. "I don't care."

"Wa-Wait." The heiress spoke up shakily, drawing the attention of most everyone present. "A-Are you saying th-that... D-Deidara-kun is in-in the Akatsuki n-now...?"

The leader waited a moment before answering. "...Not yet."

Even those two words, however, made Deidara's black-rimmed eye widen. "So... The test is over? Was that it, yeah? I still have four more to go—"

The leader shadow cut him off. "No, you don't. It would be *stupid* to let you fight all of the members of the Akatsuki, and see their techniques. Or... some of their techniques, as it may be. The test was to fight five members and survive."

"But I'm still in?" The Iwa-nin asked eagerly, his frown turning into a broad grin.

"I found Orochimaru's head." Sasori spoke up once more, holding up said severed head by its hair. Hinata made a face; she had never liked limbs without a body attached.

"Whatever." The leader rolled his eyes, then turned sharply to one of the other shadows. "Tobi. Do you still have Orochimaru's ring?"

One of the shadows perked up, giving him a thumbs-up. "Yes, Leader-sama!" That voice was also male, though much more... energetic than any of the others'.

"You keep Orochimaru's ring. Give yours to Deidara-san." The leader commanded, and whoever this Tobi person was, he quickly obeyed. "Itachi, release him."

"Yes, Leader-sama." Itachi deadpanned, stepping away from the blonde as he let go. Predictably, the explosives expert made a lunge for him, but was halted by Kisame picking him up by the back of his shirt. The Uchiha hadn't moved in the least at the attempted assault, though.

The Tobi-shadow scurried over and dropped a ring into Deidara's hands, and clapped him on the back. The blonde looked perplexed at the physical contact; hadn't he attacked the leader before, without being able to touch him?

Said leader just crossed his arms and looked smug and mysterious. Hidan also released Hinata, and she nervously joined Deidara by his side, where he was still looking in awe at the ring. She gave him an affectionate, if edgy, one-armed hug, staying near him. Frankly, these men *scared* her. Any one of them could kill her without breaking a sweat.

"Did you hear that, Bya-chan? We made it, yeah! We finally made it!" He practically tackled her in a hug, jumping up and down excitedly. She laughed at his antics, hugging him back and joining in his jumping.

But their joy was cut short, however, when the leader pulled them apart. "Incorrect. *You* made it, Deidara-san. The Hyuuga girl didn't. We only have room for one new member, and you made the cut." He said flatly, then explained, "You will wear your ring on your right index finger. You will wear it at all times, under pain of death. You will also wear your uniform on all missions and

whenever leaving the hideout, and you will always wear purple nail polish on your fingernails and toenails. Your partner is Sasori, and you will usually accompany him on your missions. I will be referred to as Leader-sama, but you may refer to the other members however you wish. Fighting other members is allowed, but so is killing, so I'd watch your back."

Deidara, however, had only heard the first part. "Wait... Bya-chan can't be my partner? I can't be with her anymore, yeah?"

"I don't care what you do outside of Akatsuki missions and meetings. But *Sasori* will be your official partner." The leader deadpanned. "If you dare trust an outsider, it's your own neck on the line."

The blonde still didn't look like he liked that idea, but he didn't say anything more.

"Here is your uniform. Wear it however you please, but wear it." The leader once again demonstrated the fact that the physical limits only worked one way, and handed him a folded black cloak with red clouds on it. He also set a bottle of nail polish on top, and then a scroll. "If you have any questions past this, don't ask me."

Deidara still stayed silent, and Hinata realized with a faint blush that one of his arms was still around her from their hug and following victory dance.

Then the leader appeared to *smile*. That in itself was a rather frightening idea. But instead he stated, "Welcome to the Akatsuki."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Well, our little Iwa-nin has finally achieved his dream! -proud snuffle- It seems that somehow the princess has gotten into the Akatsuki as well, though not as an official member. Hmm, I wonder what that could entail...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara had been in the Akatsuki exactly one month, to the hour. The blonde stared intently at the clock on the wall before him, tapping his finger on his knee impatiently. He'd never been one for anniversaries before, but somehow he thought that this one would be more... special.

The Akatsuki itself wasn't all that special, that was for sure.

He sighed, eye still on the ticking hands. In thirty-three minutes it would be a full month since he got in. A full thirty-one days. One full cycle and four days of the moon.

One month in this hell.

"Deidara-kun?" There was a soft knock on his door. Even without the voice, he knew it was his *actual* partner (not that stuck-up redheaded bastard); she was the only one who ever knocked. Sasori just walked in like he owned the place, Kisame and Kakuzu would kick the door down, the one time Hidan came into his room he cut through the door (with his scythe which he *somehow* had gotten back), and no one else ever came in.

"Yeah?" He called back, not moving from his position. At three forty-two it would be one month. Thirty-one minutes to go.

Life in the Akatsuki was... surprising. Surprisingly docile, surprisingly domestic, surprisingly quiet, surprisingly casual, surprisingly *boring*. Deidara had done absolutely *nothing* for this past month, aside from bicker with Sasori and the orange-masked freak. (Whose name turned out to be *Tobi*. The Iwa-nin was still trying to figure out what kind of name it was.) Sasori had done nothing but argue with him about art and complain about his 'total and utter lack of any fighting ability', and none of the other members had disagreed. As the newbie of the organization, he felt like a black sheep.

But the Hyuuga girl had made it bearable. Officially, she was his subordinate, as she couldn't be in the group itself. It drove him crazy on a regular basis, but he'd have to live with it. At least until some other member died and left an opening behind. Unofficially, however, she was still his true partner.

The kunoichi in question opened and closed the door quietly behind her. She stood nervously in front of him for a few moments, twiddling her fingers, then stepped hesitantly over toward his bed and sat down on it beside him. Her dark hair was yet again tied back, unlike his own. (He was lazy that morning and left it down. Every member he'd met in the hallways and random rooms of the hideout had been sure to comment on it.) "Are you... alright?" She asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Twenty-seven minutes.

Deidara sighed and hung his head. He then allowed himself to fall sideways, leaning on her shoulder and wrapping his arms loosely around her waist. "This is not what I had expected, yeah. I liked the no-rules thing of being *out* of the Akatsuki. And I haven't even gone on any missions or anything. My art is suffering because of it, yeah!"

"Well... it hasn't been that long. You're still new to it. It will get better." The Hyuuga said slowly,

as if unsure.

Then again, how can she be sure? She's not the one who wanted to get into the Akatsuki, he thought with a mental sigh. He felt pretty selfish, dragging her into all of this. But she hadn't left, right? That had to count for something.

"How are you faring?" The blonde asked, rubbing his head against her side.

"Well enough. It seems I've been recruited for kitchen duty more often than other members... not that I'm complaining." Her voice had a smile in it, at any rate. That alone made Deidara smile as well. At least someone was having fun here. "And I haven't seen Itachi, so that's good." She added in a lower voice. He winced; so she was still having nightmares...

"Nightmares still, yeah?" He asked, sitting back up to look into her white eyes. "I thought you said that they stopped."

"They've been... slowing. I don't have as many, I mean..." She looked down instantly, biting her lip. He noticed the dark rings around her eyes, and wished he knew some sleeping jutsu for her. "It's really alright. At this rate, they'll stop soon."

"Didn't you say that you don't have any nightmares with me, yeah?" He asked, adding this to the long, growing list of why he hated Uchiha Itachi. She nodded, looking shyly up at him. "Then just sleep with me tonight. I'll talk to Itachi tomorrow to see if there's some way to get rid of emotional trauma caused by his eyes. That's if he hasn't died on this mission, yeah." Deidara snickered evilly. He was fond of the leader's 'killing allowed' rule, though he'd just have to train a bit longer to get on par to where he could enforce it.

"N-No, I'm fine. Really." She blushed lightly, frowning. "You shouldn't talk that way about your comrades..."

"Comrades that have tried to kill us, yeah. Plus Leader-sama said that we can kill other members, anyway... That Uchiha has been bugging me since day one." He glanced at the clock; twenty minutes to go. The navy-haired kunoichi followed his gaze, though clearly didn't catch on to the countdown. "Have you seen Kabuto at all?"

Her gaze hardened into a glare, but she kept her eyes on the clock. "No. I haven't, and I hope I don't ever again." Both of them were still pissed at the medic, needless to say. Sasori was sure to mention him at least weekly, if not daily, and point out the fact that they were both naïve enough to trust him so flippantly. It only rubbed salt in the wound. It went unspoken between the two that the next time they saw him, it wouldn't be pretty.

"I wonder if he's dead yet..." He murmured idly, sliding back down to lean his head on her shoulder. "Aren't you bored, yeah?"

"It's not boring, really... it's more... docile. It almost reminds me of home..." She bit off the end of the sentence, feeling him stiffen. He didn't need reminding of such things now. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it like that, you know that..." She hastily added. "It reminds me of a *real* home. There are people you like, and people you don't like, but they're all together on it, and there's always more complex and deeper relationships and rationales beneath it all..."

"Yeah, I guess." He said shortly, still irked. Deidara sat up once more, rubbing his shoulder awkwardly. "Do you still miss Konoha, yeah?"

"I can get used to it here." She replied simply, avoiding the question. "It's nicer than what I

would've thought."

"Do you miss Neji?"

The kunoichi looked down into her lap. Slowly, she nodded, her dark hair shielding her face from his view. The blonde looked at her for a moment, head cocked. Then he reached down and pushed her hair back and tucked it behind her ear, trying to look into her eyes. He was bored enough to attempt this.

"Wanna find him, yeah?" The Akatsuki member asked in a casual voice.

She jolted up, white eyes locking with his own blue one. Unspoken gratitude, shock, and a blender full of other emotions streaked across her face, and she hesitantly ducked her head once. Whether or not it was a nod or merely the beginning of tears, they would never know.

"You have someone else to find, brat." Sasori stood in the doorway, arms crossed, leaning against the frame. The redhead looked as bored as always, but then again, they'd only known him a month. He probably always looked that way, and they just couldn't discern his emotions and expressions from one another. "Leader-sama has given us your first mission."

-.-.-

The mission was simple.

In theory, anyway.

Sasori informed them both of it, and the way he made it sound, it would only take a few hours. In reality, it could easily take days. They were to infiltrate one of the five great shinobi villages, and kidnap the Kage. He would then be assassinated with one of the leader's techniques; the puppet master was vague on that part. Get in, capture the target, get out alive. It sounded simple.

But of course, kidnapping a Kage wasn't going to be simple.

What made it worse was that it was the *Kazekage*. Of Sunagakure. Gaara of the desert. Hinata had seen his skills and power first-hand, and it was terrifying. Three years would've only given him more strength, and then there would have to be the ANBU and the jounin protecting him and the village to contend with.

"A-And we have to complete this with the th-three of us...?" She asked in a whimper. Gaara was a demon in a fight. He was a thing of nightmares. How were they going to take *him* down?

Sasori gave her a withering look. From the while she'd been with them, it hadn't been hard to notice that he didn't like her. (Then again, he didn't like Deidara, but he seemed to loathe her.) "Oh. *You're* going to be coming along, then. That will make four of us, though I doubt you'll be much help in a fight."

"Who's the third, yeah?" Deidara broke in irritably, scowling at the redhead.

"That would be me." A new voice replied, and Sasori rolled his eyes. The other two looked over to the doorway, which was, again, open to reveal someone they didn't want to see. Adjusting his glasses, the silver-haired medic smirked.

Hinata and Deidara didn't waste any time. Neither of them had been lying when they said that the next time they saw Kabuto it would get ugly. Sasori noticed his blonde partner getting up and restrained him before he could do anything, but once again underestimated the Konoha kunoichi. She jumped to her feet, took the two steps needed to cross the room, and glared up into the spy's eyes. Kabuto raised his eyebrows expectantly. He received the hardest slap across the face she could manage, and then for good measure, a *Juuken* strike to the chest.

She felt someone's arms around her shoulders, restraining her from further harming the medic-nin. Kabuto straightened back up, wiping blood from his mouth, smirk gone and glaring. "I hadn't expected my return to be very welcoming, but I hadn't expected the sweet little Hinata to brutally attack an ally."

"You're no ally of ours, yeah!" Deidara shouted from behind her, still held back by Sasori. Hinata looked up to who was restraining her. The heiress held back a shudder; it was one of Sasori's many puppets. It looked down at her with blank, dead eyes.

"According to Sasori-sama I am." He replied coolly, running a healing hand down his front to fix any internal injuries she might've gotten lucky enough to give him. "I am going to be needed not only as the medic-nin, but also for information and infiltration. Though... with Hinata here, Sasori-sama, we may not need to risk that."

"What are you saying?" The monotonous Akatsuki member asked, his voice dangerously low. There was a dull thud, and then he added, "You can hit me all you like; it won't hurt me."

"I haven't even accepted this mission, yeah! And I'm not going anywhere with that traitorous bastard!" Deidara shouted, "Let me go!"

"I don't think so."

"What did you mean, Kabuto?" Hinata asked, morbidly curious about what he meant as well. The puppet's grasp on her slowly loosened, and when its arms finally dropped, she stepped back to show that she wouldn't attack the spy again. Yet.

"As far as I know, Konohagakure hasn't broadcasted your kidnapping to any of the other villages. So as far as Sunagakure knows, you could be visiting the village on your own mission or for political reasons. After all, as the Hyuuga's heiress, I'm sure you have enough political power to stop a lot of people from asking questions." He explained, the smirk returning.

Evidently Sasori had released Deidara, because the blonde's sandal flew across the room and narrowly missed Kabuto's head. "You really think Suna-nin are that stupid, yeah?" In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Hinata had to suppress a giggle.

"And why are you defending Suna-nin, Deidara?" Sasori asked calmly, though there might've been a hint of amusement in his voice.

"I—uh—I'm not! Yeah!" He snapped, though he was obviously flustered by the question. "Jeez, I thought *you* would've said something like that, anyway!"

"Deidara, you're an idiot. We're *missing*-nin. None of us like our home villages, aside from you and possibly the kunoichi." There was a definite tone of amusement now. Hinata turned and pushed the puppet aside, sitting back on the edge of the bed on the other side of Deidara. They weren't going to get anywhere like this, but it was almost funny how the world's worst killers could argue about such stupid things.

"Yeah, well... this organization is crazy, yeah. I'm not even going to try to argue with any of you." The Iwa-nin stuck out his tongue, then turned away and crossed his arms. "Let's just get this stupid mission over with."

"Deidara, you haven't even asked who the target is. You only know that he's the Kazekage. You have no knowledge of his skills, jutsus, allies or even what he looks like." Kabuto pointed out, amused. "You're going to need a bit more preparation, don't you think?"

Hinata once again tried not to laugh. The Akatsuki was quite surprising about how laid-back it was outside of missions. "Kazekage-sama's name is Gaara. He has the ability to control vast amounts of sand however he pleases. His brother and sister are his main bodyguards when they can be, one of them is a fan-wielder and the other is a puppet user." Sasori smirked at the last sentence. "Gaara is about average height, red, spiky hair, and light green eyes with dark rings around them. He usually carries a large gourd made of sand on his back that can be disintegrated down into that sand to be used as a weapon." She recited, knowing it was severely lacking, but at least she had the basics down.

"Yes, most people could discern most of that at a glance." The redhead said dryly. "You're missing the key points, though."

"Hey, at least she tells me the stuff, instead of talking in circles." Deidara defended her instantly, giving Sasori a push. He received a glare but nothing more.

"We can explain on the way. Sunagakure is about three days away, so we'll be there in two." Kabuto chirped in his normally cheerful voice. (He too received a glare.)

"Yeah right. I don't know about you two, but Bya-chan and I are flying, yeah." The blue-eyed artist sniffed primly.

"You are not to leave your partner, and it would be unwise anyway." Sasori retorted. He crossed his arms, idly examining the nail polish on one of his hands. "And I am *not* flying on those unstable monstrosities you call art."

The conversation dissolved from there. The pair bickered about art, Kabuto just watched, and Hinata was alone with her thoughts. Their first mission in the Akatsuki... or rather, Deidara's first mission. She wasn't in the organization, and frankly, she didn't want to be. She was fine just the way she was.

This mission wasn't going to be easy, though. Gaara was one of the strongest shinobi she knew, and she'd only seen him fight in Konohagakure. Which meant that he had a limited amount of sand there. In Suna... he could use the whole desert. Plus, he was the Kazekage now. Was that why they wanted to capture him, for informational purposes? The Hyuuga sighed mentally, telling herself not to try to figure out the Akatsuki's reasons. It would no doubt be dangerous to try.

I wonder... just how dangerous will this mission be? she couldn't help but think. As with every mission, there was a chance of death or serious injury, but the mere thought of Gaara seemed to increase that risk tenfold. True, there was two Akatsuki members and a highly skilled medic... but she was just a weak Hyuuga chuunin. She had only just completed her first *Kaiten* a few weeks ago. If it came to a fight, she wouldn't stand a chance, and she knew it. But there was also little chance that she would have to.

That's what she told herself, anyway.

Sasori had said that they were ordered to leave immediately. So basically he forced them both to pack up their things as he watched, and was hurrying them out the door immediately afterward. Deidara glanced backward behind him, looking back at the clock.

Three forty-two.

The Akatsuki member smirked, and allowed the shorter Suna-nin to shove him out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The dragon and princess finally have their first mission! Unfortunately, its with a man who's already betrayed them once before, and a Suna-nin neither of them like. But taking down the Kazekage, Gaara...is that possible? How will they fare, or will they be murdered by the demon of the sand?

A Musical Chapter

Chapter Notes

APPROX. NUMBER OF SONG REFERENCES: 15

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I like where we are." Deidara announced, looking around at the sparse surroundings. The Land of Wind was pure desert, drought-stricken, but the Iwa-nin didn't seem to mind. "It's warm, yeah." He spread his arms, basking in the warmth.

Sasori just smirked. "I'm sure it is. We'll see how you like the warmth in a few hours... Oh, Deidara, take a few steps to the left." The blonde looked back over his shoulder questioningly, but obediently took a few steps to his left. Three steps over, he suddenly fell in a previously hidden hole of sand with an ungraceful squawk. "That is what you call a sand trap. Now let's see how long it takes for him to get out."

Hinata squeaked and hurried over toward the edge of the hole, peering down fretfully. Deidara seemed to be unharmed, though peeved, and trapped in the bottom of a large bowl-shape. The sand was too loose for him to climb back up; it kept sliding out from under his fingers.

"Poor unfortunate soul." Kabuto shook his head sadly, also looking down at him. "He'll never get out."

Unfortunately, the loose sand wasn't only on the sides of the bowl. Some of it crumbled under the medic's sandals, and flailing for a moment, he finally fell in. The weight shift also caused more of it to cave down into the hole, and Hinata slid down to join them with a shriek. After the dust had settled and the three were done coughing, Sasori spoke up from above them.

"You three are going to die before we get to Sunagakure. Haven't any of you ever been in a desert before?" He called flatly, adjusting the hood of his desert outfit. He was the only one to bring anything for crossing it, and already the other three were regretting their decision.

A half hour later, the three were still stuck in it.

Mostly because when Deidara had fallen, his clay pouch had fallen off and was up, sitting beside an amused and cruel Sasori. They really were stuck down there, and the sun was starting to take its toll.

"That's it. I've given up, yeah." Deidara called, attempting to tie up the rest of his hair to keep it off his back. "There's no escape." Kabuto and Hinata both wearily nodded their agreement.

"And this is only the desert you're contending with. Just wait until we reach Suna." Sasori called back, reclining lazily against a dune. He appeared completely at ease with the sun's heat, and wasn't even sweating. (Whereas the other three members of the team were sweating buckets. Hinata was still stubbornly wearing her jacket, however.)

"Why don't you *help* us out of here, Sasori-sama?" Kabuto asked irritably, shading his eyes against the sun with his arm. "It'd be much easier."

"Because you three are idiots. You're going to die as idiots, or you could all suddenly grow a brain and think yourselves out of the mess you've gotten yourselves into." The redhead replied calmly.

Hinata sighed, and decided to take the man's advice. It would be better than wasting their breath arguing with him, at any rate. She closed her eyes, and tried to ignore the sun and heat. Her face was flushed and she knew that soon she would probably faint from either sunstroke or dehydration. And knowing Sasori, he'd probably leave her behind to die.

The heiress cracked open an eye, seeing Deidara sitting in front of her. He popped a soldier pill into his mouth, grinning at the dirty look Kabuto shot him. They probably wouldn't be much help at this point; the heat was already grating on their nerves and they hated each other normally...

"Soldier pills won't help you with dehydration, Deidara. They're only meant as *emergency* energy and chakra boosters." The medic pointed out.

"Says you, yeah."

"Here we go again..." Sasori muttered from above them.

The sand was too loose and slippery to try to climb out of the hole. And they couldn't jump out; it was hard enough just *standing* in the stuff. The sun was climbing in the sky, and they would all get sick from the heat if they didn't get out of here soon. Leader-sama wouldn't like that, needless to say. And they still had the rest of the desert to cross...

Right when she thought she might have something, Hinata felt herself being picked up. She wiggled and uttered a squeak, eyes snapping open to look up at Deidara. "U-Um—"

"Here, stand on my shoulders and then jump, yeah." He said simply with a grin.

"The only problem is that there are three of us in here. That may work for the first two, but whoever is in here last is sort of screwed." Kabuto snapped from behind him, but Deidara only paused to flip him off before helping her to stand on his shoulders. She looked down at him for a moment, but then jumped over lightly to land next to Sasori.

"Oh, so you send the kunoichi out first. How *noble*." He said sarcastically, crossing his arms. Hinata glared at him, but then carefully picked her way back over to the edge of the hole.

"How are you two going to get out?" She asked, but it turned into a rhetorical question when she spied the Iwa-nin's clay pouch laying a few feet off. The Hyuuga kicked it into the hole, wiping her brow with her sleeve. As long as she was still sweating, she was okay. Once she stopped... then she was in trouble.

Ten minutes later, they were on the road again. And it only took that long because at first Deidara refused to help Kabuto out. (It was Hinata who finally did help him out.) The four were finally moving again, only three of them were already exhausted and could barely keep up with Sasori's pace. The Suna-nin noticed but didn't seem to mind hurrying them along every few minutes.

But an hour later, they had barely gone anywhere. Hinata had finally shed her jacket, tying it around her waist. The relief only lasted a few moments, though; she was still as hot as ever.

"Could... could we please stop for a moment...?" She asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. She felt ready to faint. Sasori glanced back at her, annoyance written across his features.

He sighed. "This is why I dislike kunoichi."

"It's not her fault, yeah! If you would've just gotten us out of that damn hole in the first place, we'd

practically already be there!" Deidara snapped. She looked back at him with her Byakugan. All of them (aside from Sasori, who was still that odd little mass of chakra) were physically exhausted, though admittedly she was the worst off. (Probably because she only took off her jacket a bit ago.)

"It's easy, once you know how it's done." He replied simply, not rising to the bait of an argument. "If you really were Akatsuki level, you would've figured out about an hour ago that even if I don't want to fly, it doesn't mean you can't. You could've saved yourself a lot of grief."

The explosives expert looked ready to explode.

-.-.-

Surprisingly, it was a few more hours before they really had to stop. Sasori was completely fine with the weather and conditions, though he kept glancing nervously around. (When asked about it, he just replied that he missed Hiruko.) Kabuto was only fine because he kept himself going with some annoyingly convenient medical jutsu. It was the kunoichi who finally fainted from the heat.

"If she can't keep up, leave her behind." Sasori muttered, prodding her limp body with his foot. Deidara gave him what could only be described as a death glare. He then just picked her up and set her on his bird, jumping up behind her. "Why are you so protective of her? She's not of much use to us."

"If she's our ticket into Sunagakure, I don't see why you're more worried about her, yeah." He replied diplomatically.

"I have a back-up plan. *I'm* prepared, at any rate." The art-nin's brown eyes slid down to Deidara's clay pouch. "You won't have nearly enough clay. You already used a small amount getting yourself out of that sand trap."

"I'm sure I'll be fine, yeah."

"Which only demonstrates your inexperience and recklessness. Why Leader-sama wanted *you* of all Iwa-nin is beyond me." Sasori said casually. Kabuto, who had up until now looked amused at the argument, narrowed his eyes a fraction. The blonde caught this, and slowly turned his gaze back to his Akatsuki partner.

"What do you mean... he 'chose' me, yeah? I applied for this position. How'd he even know that I'd *want* to join the organization?" He asked deliberately, slowing his bird down enough so he could look Sasori in the eye.

The puppet master just closed his eyes, and smiled. Once again, his young features transformed his expression into something that could only be described as angelic. "Maybe you aren't as stupid as you seem, after all, Deidara. Keep thinking like that, and you may get somewhere in life."

The Iwa-nin thought that something big had just transpired, though he couldn't for the life of him figure out what. Instead he just had to speed up his art to catch up to the pair again, and made sure that the kunoichi was still breathing.

It was another few hours before anything else happened (aside from when Deidara threw a scorpion at Sasori) worth mentioning. The Hyuuga still hadn't woken up, which was worrying in itself, but the blonde couldn't keep up his energy enough to control the bird. Ditching his cloak

(Sasori merely stated that Leader-sama wouldn't be pleased), Deidara was forced to give her a piggy-back ride, though the heat was stifling and it would probably do more harm than good.

"Kabuto... can't you do something about this?" Sasori asked boredly. It seemed that his patience had finally snapped in the area concerning her. Only it miraculously worked in her favor instead of against it.

"Not really. The best thing for her is to get her out of the sun and rehydrate her." The redheaded Suna-nin gave him a look that very clearly stated 'well I could've told you that'. Kabuto cleared his throat awkwardly, looking away. "I would suggest that we stop here for the day."

The sun was just now starting to set, and Deidara could feel the air cooling. The sand, however, stayed warm beneath them. Having never been to an actual desert before (just the waterless wasteland that was Iwa), he hadn't known how cold the nights could get, or how hot the days were, for that matter. Soon enough, the four were gathered around a small, smokeless fire, glaring at each other.

Deidara was starting to get chilly, not that he'd mention it to anyone. The kunoichi also seemed ready to put her jacket back on, having been woken up just a bit earlier by a peeved Sasori. She glanced at the blonde shyly, rubbing her arms. The coat was still in her lap. He guessed (accurately) that she didn't want to show 'weakness' by putting it back on just yet.

Stupid Sasori and his intimidation and sexism, he thought dryly, glaring back across the flames into the muddy brown eyes of his official partner.

The firelight cast dancing shadows behind them, making the shinobi jumpy and nervous. Occasionally one of the many night creatures of the desert would slither or crawl by, nearly silently but noticed by them all nonetheless. Each was waiting for one of the others to go to sleep first, to be deemed the 'weakest' but thanked for allowing the others to rest without having the title.

"I'll take first watch." Unsurprisingly, Sasori offered. The man didn't seem to need to sleep. Deidara just nodded curtly, and crossed his arms over his chest. "We're going to have to start again early in the morning, so you all might want to sleep."

As if any of the remaining three would willingly go to sleep first. (And frankly, Deidara didn't trust himself (or his princess!) to be sleeping in Sasori's presence. Especially in a vast desert where it'd be too easy to hide bodies...) But after an awkward few minutes, she decided to take the initiative and pulled her jacket back on over her head. Then, using her arm as a pillow, the kunoichi laid back and closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep almost instantly.

"I think I'm going to join her." Kabuto said after a moment's pause, and fell back onto his back like a dead weight. Like a good shinobi, he was asleep instantly.

Deidara was glad that he wasn't the first one to cave in. Stretching and faking a yawn, he glanced at the fellow Akatsuki member out of the corner of his eye. Sasori was just staring into the fire, unmoving and unblinking. The firelight made his hair look even redder, if possible. Just as the blonde missing-nin was laying down to also get his rest, the puppet user spoke.

"As a shinobi, do you know how to save a life?" He asked quietly, eyes still on the flames.

Deidara decided not to sit back up, and instead rolled over onto his back. "Of course. Be faster and stronger than the enemy, protect your loved ones with your life, yeah. That's academy stuff."

Sasori looked up from the fire, glare flat. "Wrong." The blonde frowned, irked. "You still have a

lot to learn, brat. The easiest way to save someone's life when you're a ninja... is to stay out of their life. But you... you seem hell-bent on keeping her," he paused to nod toward the Hyuuga's sleeping form, "As close as possible. Unwise."

"I hope you know," Deidara spat, scowling, "That that has nothing to do with you, yeah. It's personal. You have no idea what's behind it all."

He got the irritating notion that Sasori was smirking from behind his tall collar. "...Perhaps." He said indifferently. "But you cannot deny that my logic is infallible. You know it to be true."

"Well you can shove your logic—and your *art*, yeah—up your stuck-up ass. Now let me go to sleep. I don't care what you say; Bya-chan is perfectly safe with me, yeah. I'll protect her." He rolled over, using his crossed arms as a pillow for his chin. After a few moments of silence, the blonde added, "I can't wait for *you* to die, though."

"I won't be dying anytime soon." The redhead replied in the same annoyingly casual tone. He didn't even seem mad at the jabs about his art and logic. "You can be sure of that fact, Deidara."

The Iwa-nin didn't reply. He wouldn't give the infuriating Akatsuki member the satisfaction of getting into a deeper argument and losing sleep over it. But he still couldn't help his thoughts straying to Sasori...

The man was an enigma, to say the least. And that was just his physical being. Deidara still hadn't seen him eat, or sleep for that matter. Of course, it could very easily be explained by the fact that they had separate rooms (as far away from each other as possible) and very rarely saw each other until this mission. But the fact that he looked so *young*, yet spoke so old... and referred to himself as Deidara's elder! Something was off about the puppet user.

Not to mention the fact that what he'd said—both about the sleeping girl beside him and the leader of the Akatsuki—was going to continuously eat away at him.

Finally, Deidara just wrote it off to 'things Sasori says to drive him crazy'.

-.-.-

"It was pretty stupid to sleep in the desert without blankets." Sasori announced the next morning, glaring flatly at the other three. "At least the kunoichi had the sense to put another layer on."

"She *has* a name, yeah!" Deidara snarled. Hinata immediately pegged him as the crabby type when sleep-deprived. (Well, sleep deprived wasn't the word. They'd gone several nights without sleep before. It was more like... he didn't get enough sleep. If he slept, he might as well sleep a full night. Hanabi was like that, too.) Still, she couldn't help but hold back a smile at his defensive position on her behalf. (Even if Sasori was the biggest jerk she'd ever met and deserved it.) "Now, what's for breakfast?"

Well, it was nice while it lasted.

"I don't know, what did you bring for food?" The redhead asked with a smirk, knowing full well that it was unlikely that Deidara had thought of that. (A month without missions could dull even the sharpest tool.)

That innocently casual comment led to the largest (verbal) fight between the two yet. Kabuto and Hinata looked on, wearing identical long-suffering expressions.

"I don't even know why Leader-sama paired us up, yeah. We're complete opposites!" Deidara said waspishly, crossing his arms with a huff.

Sasori smacked his forehead with his palm, groaning, "Deidara, you dolt. *You're* the one who killed Orochimaru—*you're* the one who would replace him as my partner. It's not my fault—or Leader-sama's fault—that you didn't go and kill Itachi or Zetsu or someone else."

Hinata couldn't help but think that she would've liked it a bit better if Itachi had been killed, but then again, she'd never met Orochimaru in person. He could've been just as bad. (And she had no idea who that 'Zetsu' shinobi was.)

The blonde missing-nin was only momentarily nonplussed. "Yeah, well... I don't see how a kid like *you* got into the Akatsuki in the first place. At least I fought my way in! I just took down Orochimaru because he convenient, yeah."

It was the shorter art-nin's turn for speechlessness. Finally, though, after a few good seconds, he ground out, "First, a bit of respect for your *elders*, brat. I'm tired of your insolence and ignorance. Let me enlighten you on something." Sasori beckoned to him to come closer, and Hinata noticed that she and Kabuto also leaned in to listen. The redhead also noticed this, but didn't look overly concerned. Deidara just looked partly curious, partly insolent. They all leaned in, almost eagerly. "Leader-sama ordered us all *not* to kill you. Hidan couldn't use his bonding jutsu on you, Kakuzu couldn't rip your heart out, I couldn't use my strongest puppets, and similarly Itachi and Kisame couldn't use their strongest jutsus. ...Though I recall that Itachi disobeyed that order..."

"But I digress. The fact that you are alive and standing has nothing to do with your own non-existent skills. The only reason you are is that Leader-sama has uses for you and your jutsu. That and the fact that Orochimaru was starting to deviate from the Akatsuki's plans... You are not here by your own merit and strength, Deidara." He finished to silence.

Kabuto was visibly trying not to snicker. Sasori turned his glare on him, and that wiped the smirk off his face rather quickly.

But Deidara looked even angrier than the redhead, and for good reason. Either it was an elaborate and convenient lie, or it was the truth... and either way, Hinata had to admit that it stung. It could possibly mean that all they'd been though... had been for nothing. She couldn't help but hope, even if only for Deidara, that it was a lie. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, seeing how he was taking this revelation.

He was the maddest she'd ever seen him, including during the fight between he and her cousin. With the glare on his face, the heiress could see how he'd become Akatsuki. "...Liar." He said softly, hands twitching toward his clay pouch. Hinata took a step backward, seeing that this would get physical real fast. Kabuto followed suit, narrowing his eyes and glancing warily from art-nin to art-nin.

"How do you know? You *know* I'm right, brat." Sasori replied, just as quietly. "How else could you accomplish that feat without dying? You're much too weak for that."

Time seemed to slow down. Activating the Byakugan, Hinata barely managed to catch most of it; *this is the true speed and power of the Akatsuki*, she only just had time to think. Deidara's hands went down to his clay, and a broad, bloodthirsty grin spread across his face. The heiress and the medic backpedaled on reflex to get out of the way. Sasori darted forward, faster than any of them,

grabbing both of the blonde's wrists and pinning them to his sides. Said blonde immediately tried to wrestle free, but got no where (even after attempting to kick). Still not one to give up that easily, Deidara jerked forward and attempted to headbutt his Akatsuki partner, only to have his target move at the last moment and harmlessly allow him to miss and end up setting his chin on his shoulder.

Sasori leaned forward, and it was only because she both had the infamous Byakugan and could read lips that allowed her to tell what he said to Deidara. "I've proven my point." Then he leaned forward a bit more, blocking her view.

-.-.-

"I've proven my point. You're not fit to be called Akatsuki." Sasori had said at the time.

Their almost-fight had happened yesterday. They hadn't spoken to each other since.

Frankly, Deidara *refused* to believe that anything the redheaded bastard said was true. Yes, it was probably true that he was currently the weakest member of the Akatsuki, but that was only because he was new to the organization. But no matter how much sense it made, none of it could be true. It *couldn't* be true. His pride wouldn't take it.

The kunoichi seemed worried about him, and tried talking to him several times about it, but he gave her the cold shoulder as well. He felt bad for it, but he really couldn't stand being comforted by her right now. She really was too kind for him.

Kabuto... was being Kabuto. Of course, they didn't speak to each other; they both knew how much the other hated them. Occasionally the medic-nin would make a wry comment to either of the other members of the squad, but the explosives user wouldn't rise to his bait. (Besides, he got back at him by eating more soldier pills. He knew it infuriated the medic, and used it to his advantage.)

It was getting to be a very quiet trip to Sunagakure.

"Deidara-kun... are you alright?" She sidled up to run beside him, looking nervous and fidgety. No doubt such tense silence would conflict with her personality.

"Hn." He grunted in reply, keeping his eyes on the mouths on his hands; they were currently chewing on some clay mixed with some of the desert's sand. It was an experiment he'd wanted to do for some time, mixing other earthy elements into his clay and see how it would mold, move and more importantly, detonate. Now was as good as time as any to try it out.

She sighed sadly. "I wish you'd talk to me... I-I went through the majority of that with you as well, remember...? I know what it's like to find out that your dreams are hollow..."

He kept his eyes on his hands. If he looked at her now, he'd crack. Sasori was just a bastard, putting all of these doubts and thoughts and lies into his head like that... But a cruel little voice in his head chose to take the Suna-nin's side. *Hollow? You knew they were hollow the first time you lived through a fight with them. There was no way that you could survive against two Akatsuki members like that unless they weren't to kill you.*

"If you do choose to talk... I'm here, alright?"

Like she had anywhere else to go. They were in a *desert*, for god's sake. None of them aside from Sasori really knew how to get themselves anywhere at this point.

He's probably leading us off in a wrong direction to kill us, Deidara thought sourly, glaring at the back of his partner's head. *But then again, why would he have to? This mission is going to kill us anyway.*

-.-.-

Neji sighed hopelessly. Ever since that fight, weeks ago, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Hinata—or the blonde bastard. Try as he might, he couldn't find any trail or hint of where she'd been. It was like she had disappeared off the face of the world.

Or worse.

The Hyuuga prodigy knew that there was only one rational explanation for her disappearance. It killed him to finally admit it, but there was no other rationale.

Deidara had finally gotten into the Akatsuki, and took her with him. There wouldn't be much hope for getting hold of her now, if he could even find her. She was untouchable.

So now Neji had a new goal: the Akatsuki. If he could get one of the members, no doubt they'd be willing to spill on the newbie, if given the proper persuasion. But in order to catch one of the members, he'd have to find one. Yet again, he was at a block.

But there was one way to get closer to one of the members. Because he knew someone who had been tracking and hunting one of them for what seemed like years.

Uchiha Sasuke would be his ticket to Uchiha Itachi. Itachi would be his ticket into the Akatsuki. And once in the Akatsuki, the brunette could finally find his cousin. (After that, he had no clue.) So that meant that Neji had to yet again find Sasuke.

At least he had a lead; go to the Mist. Surely a rogue Uchiha and water-based swordsman couldn't be that hard to find, right? Neji sighed again at the hopeless prospect. But he had to try. It wasn't like he could do much else, anyway.

The genius turned east, looking at the rising sun. He'd had enough of the Land of Wind, anyway. It was nothing but sand and cactus (if that), and he was positive that there couldn't be any Akatsuki hideouts in that country. Now he needed to make it to the Land of Water, hunt down his ex-partner, and then hunt down the Akatsuki.

Everything was much easier when it was listed out like that.

"Hinata-sama... I will find you," He vowed, and headed off on his new mission.

-.-.-

Two and a half days after their departure, four sand traps, one case of soldier pills and one

Akatsuki-leveled fight later, the four arrived at the gates of Sunagakure.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: We finally hear from Neji! And what's this? He's trying to find Sasuke-kun again! I wonder what that could entail... But the four have finally arrived at Suna, and not in the best spirits. Deidara has already wasted some of his clay; will his remaining clay be enough to take down the terrifying Gaara of the Desert?

Battle On! Dragon VS Demon!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Bya-chan... I'm sorry." Deidara suddenly felt compelled to say. She looked over at him curiously. "I'm sorry that I dragged you into this, and that I ignored you, and that I've been a general as— dragon, yeah." He turned to face her, grinning. It was obviously a fake grin, she could tell that, but she smiled gratefully nonetheless.

"Ah, it's okay, Deidara-kun..." She replied simply.

The grin became a bit more forced. "I'm sorry I'm going to have to leave you, yeah. But you can go back to your cousin after this; *you* don't have any alliance with the Akatsuki, really." She probably had no idea how much preparation it took for him to say those words, but it needed to be done. Sasori was also looking at him at that point, coolly evaluating him with that flat stare of his. Deidara hated his guts. But he ignored him; his *real* partner deserved his attention right now.

"Huh?" Was all she said, looking confused. But he could tell she was starting to catch on. Realization was leaking into her beautiful white eyes.

"My promise still stands. I'll protect you, yeah. But... after this, I won't be able to do anything." He placed his hands on her shoulders, pleased when she didn't flinch away. The blonde hung his head, instead staring at the ground.

"You knew, this whole time?" Sasori asked quietly, rhetorically. "I see. You aren't as stupid as what I first thought."

As much as he didn't want to rise to the bait, Deidara had a few questions to ask the Akatsuki member, and now was as good a time as ever. "Sasori, is that why you chose to tell me all this? Because I wouldn't live to tell Leader-sama?"

"Yes." He replied simply, and let it drop at that.

Huffing at the redhead's arrogance, he finally forced himself to look back at the dark-haired kunoichi. She looked back at him, feigned ignorance gone. "Th-This is a suicide mission, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"Then we're just going to have to surprise everyone, aren't we?"

Deidara blinked at her courage, then relaxed and smiled. He ducked his head once in a nod, and the smile hardened into a grin. "Oh yeah. Ready, Bya-chan?"

-.-.-

The Kazekage sat at his desk, boredly looking over some inane political document concerning tariffs on imports from Konoha. Frankly, he didn't much care. Most of it was just a cover for the Leaf to try to hoard money, still trying to get over its minor depression from a lack of proper

shinobi. It really wasn't *his* fault that their standards were slipping and too many ninja were dying on missions.

He glanced out with a flat look at the night lights of his village, the sand in his gourd rustling quietly. Nothing was amiss, at least nothing obvious. The night was still, perhaps a bit too still, but it could just be signaling a coming storm.

He stood up, giving up on the document. Gaara really didn't give a damn about it, so long as it was worked out peacefully. He was bored, pure and simple, and a bored insomniac Jinchuuriki was nothing to shake a stick at. Morning—and the bustle and business that it brought with it—wouldn't come for quite awhile. And only the night staff and some ANBU were out at this time, anyway.

One of the messenger hawks, an unimportant one, flew by his window. It was departing, by the looks of it, for Konohagakure. Probably announcing some mission into foreign lands, Gaara surmised, and turned his face from the window.

He *had* a job to do, as the Kazekage, he knew that. But sometimes, it really was just so *boring*. *No doubt Naruto will throw a fit when he finds out just how boring*, the redhead thought with almost-amusement. He did believe that one day, his blonde friend would become the Hokage. (And truthfully, he would like the fellow Jinchuuriki much more as the Hokage than the loud, busty old woman who was currently in charge. She yelled and drank too much.)

Against his wishes, his pale eyes were drawn back to the window. The night really *was* still. Unnaturally still. It really must be quite the storm that was coming.

The guard looked surprised—or suddenly awake, at any rate—at the arrival of two visitors from out of the darkness. One of them was short, and only covered in a light traveling cloak with the hood down. Unsuspicious enough. The other, on the other hand, was taller, shrouded in shadows, with a full-length cloak with the hood up. Definitely not friendly.

"Halt. State your business with Sunagakure." The guard commanded in a low voice. The pair stopped, but stayed silent for long enough that the man was afraid he'd have to repeat himself.

But then, the shorter one spoke. "Hy-Hyuuga Hinata. Heiress of the Hyuuga clan, from Konohagakure. I-I have business with Kazekage-sama..." It was undoubtedly female, and shy from the sound of it. Narrowing his eyes and peering into the night, the guard saw the tell-tale dark hair and white eyes that supported her story. The Konoha hitai-ate tied around her neck proved it.

"And who is your... escort?" He asked gruffly.

"ANBU." The taller figure replied shortly, in a male voice. It would make sense, a Konoha ambassador traveling alone with an ANBU guard. Quicker and safer that way. He stepped forward, and raised his head enough for the guard to see the feline mask underneath the hood.

True, ANBU could be faked easily enough, but the Byakugan and Leaf headband not so much.

The man stepped aside, allowing the two access into the narrow passageway into the village. The Hyuuga girl nodded politely as she passed, keeping her white eyes staring forward. The guard turned his gaze outward into the desert night once more, not seeing the two shadows follow them

inside Sunagakure.

-.-.-

Hinata was trying hard not to show any outward signs of panic. But inside, her heart was racing and her thoughts were even more so. She'd suspected that this was a suicide mission all along, but it was a quiet suspicion hanging out in the back of her mind. Finding out that they weren't supposed to come back alive, officially, was a different story. The other three seemed unperturbed, which only made it worse.

Glancing around and finally activating her bloodline limit, she whispered, "All clear."

Deidara practically materialized out of thin air beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Good job, Bya-chan." He whispered into her ear, doing his own once-over of the scene.

"Aren't you glad that I didn't let you scratch my hitai-ate after all?" She asked lightly, unable to resist. He just looked properly chagrined, but said nothing more.

"This way." Sasori muttered, motioning them forward further into the village. In his Suna attire (cloak conspicuously missing), he could pass for any citizen easily. Hinata and Kabuto were now safely inside, and it was only Deidara who would stand out in a bad way. He disappeared into the many shadows of the town, and to his credit, she couldn't have spotted him without the Byakugan.

The squad slunk farther into the city, dodging conspicuously guarded places and residential areas. They had a close call with a Suna ANBU, but aside from Deidara looking like he wanted to rip the ninja's throat out, they got by safely. The Kazekage tower was easily the most distinguishable building there, but the only thing that they had to go one was that Gaara was an insomniac and would *probably* be there, working.

"I'm going up, yeah." Deidara said, reaching into his clay pouch. Sasori stopped him, shaking his head.

"No. Too conspicuous; you'd be spotted in an instant. We're already in, so we're going to have to go in by ground. When we're spotted you can fly as high as you like, brat." He said quietly.

Hinata sighed; Sasori didn't even have the decency to say 'if' instead of 'when'... he really was impossible.

But then, as they all silently neared the tower, the Hyuuga got her first good look at Gaara's chakra for the first time in three years. It was massive, powerful, and strangely... sinister. It took her awhile to adjust (and to stop herself from staring), but finally she managed to convey to the others that the target was, indeed, inside.

"This is it, then." Kabuto said quietly, slipping off his ANBU mask to stare placidly up into the tower. "We got you in, Sasori-sama. The rest is up to you two."

"Don't flatter yourself, Kabuto." He replied in a growl. The medic didn't reply, just sliding the mask back down to cover his face. Hinata almost, *almost* felt sorry for Sasori; she knew what it was like dealing with Kabuto sometimes. But the moment passed, and the redhead earned no further pity.

"This is it, yeah..." Deidara breathed, staring up into tower. He slowly broke out into a broad grin, eye widening. She'd noticed that when the blonde was genuinely *scared*, he covered it with his cheerful attitude and art. He turned to face her, positively gleeful and looking more than a bit manic. But when he spoke, his voice was even and quiet. "Bya-chan... when I die, run for it. Yeah?"

She frowned, a bit frightened herself that he was so pessimistic about his immediate future. Shaking her head, she replied haltingly, "Y-You won't d-die, Deidara-kun..." *You can't.*

His grin widened. "Don't worry, Bya-chan. I'm not scared, yeah."

Liar, she realized, looking up into his eyes. There was a joy for the coming fight, the hidden bloodlust that every shinobi had, and hidden even deeper was pure desperation. Desperation to stay alive, to fight his way out of this suicidal mission, to stay with his precious people. Desperation was a stronger and scarier emotion than fear to be backing someone.

Maybe that was what they needed.

Just looking into his eye like that made her feel some of that same raw desperation. She had seen Gaara in action. Twice. And that was three years ago, when he was young and couldn't control his sand nearly as well. Not to mention all of the other shinobi that would come swarming onto the scene once the fight started. Hinata blinked, and forced herself to look down at her hands.

"Dei-Deidara-kun... you w-won't die." She repeated, partly for him, mostly for her. "You're Akatsuki n-now... You'll be fine. We all will."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right; it'd be too much to hope for if Sasori could kick the bucket, yeah." He added, loud enough for the redhead to hear. (Sasori just flipped him off.) Then, quieter, the blonde leaned down until his forehead was touching hers and added, "We can do this, can't we?"

"Yes. We can." Hinata said, as bravely as she could. Truth was, inside she was starting to feel how Deidara looked. Panicky and desperate.

"Kiss me goodbye?" She reddened at the request, unsure of whether or not she had heard him correctly. But looking at him erased all of the doubt she had about her hearing ability. The dark-haired kunoichi leaned up on the tips of her toes to plant a small peck on his cheek, but he turned his head, catching her mouth in his. Hinata was surprised (and a bit embarrassed, for some reason she couldn't name), but as quickly as he returned the kiss, he cut it off.

Deidara disappeared back into the shadows, and she followed his movements up into the tower. For the oddest reason... that really had seemed like goodbye. It seemed final, somehow. Rubbing away the tears that welled up in her eyes with her sleeve, Hinata glanced back at the other two men. Kabuto was as stoic and emotionless as ever, and Sasori looked the usual-bored. "This is why I don't like kunoichi..." He muttered, shaking his head.

"W-Well, if you don't want me to replace Deidara-kun, you better go up there and h-help him!" She replied irritably.

"I think not. This is *his* mission. Frankly, I'm hoping he dies." The redhead examined his purple-painted nails idly. Hinata glared at him for a moment, then jumped up onto the nearest roof to follow Deidara.

He knew she would follow him up, and he'd taken that into account for the upcoming fight. What the Iwa-nin hadn't taken into account was that she would go *straight* to the Kazekage's room in the tower. Deidara swore mentally, trying to somehow silently call her back, but the Hyuuga either didn't notice him or ignored him. She landed lightly on the outside balcony, stepping over toward the door, tying back her hair in a higher ponytail as she walked.

A redheaded man was suddenly *there*, in front of her. Deidara actually had to do a double-take, to make sure it wasn't Sasori. But this man had lighter hair, and from what he could tell, dark rings around his light eyes. And he was taller than Sasori as well.

The blonde mentally panicked from his hidden spot on the roof above them. *Why did Bya-chan do that?! Why did she confront him?! Ack, this isn't good*, he tried to think of a strategy to get around this new obstacle.

"Hyuuga-san." The redheaded Kazekage stated, his voice just as emotionless as Sasori's. Against his will, Deidara leaned down closer to hear the conversation, while stealthily slipping some clay into the mouths on his hands. Might as well be prepared...

"Kazekage-sama." She replied clearly, bowing slightly.

"I wasn't aware that a Konoha ambassador would be coming." The target remarked casually, spotting the biggest hole in their plan easily.

"I haven't come as a Konoha ambassador—but as a Hyuuga ambassador, Gaara-sama." Deidara silently congratulated her on fielding that inquiry, at least temporarily.

"Kazekage-sama will do." He corrected her, rather coldly. "And, as a Hyuuga, what business do you have in Sunagakure?"

She visibly winced, and the blonde could sense that this was heading downhill, very fast. He crept down onto the overhang above the balcony, his mouths spitting out a small array of clay birds. He'd have to act quickly, while he still had the element of surprise and before action was taken. "I-I, um, I wanted to talk to y-you about the political standing of the Hyuuga clan in Ko-Konoha..." She said vaguely, stuttering again.

"Is that why you chose to infiltrate my village with three foreign shinobi?" Gaara asked calmly. For the first time, the large gourd strapped to his back came to life. The cork popped out, almost on its own, and what appeared to be sand slithered out menacingly. Deidara didn't wait for anything further; he threw the birds into the air and jumped downward, maximizing his art with a hand sign.

But instead of landing on the Kazekage's head, like he'd wanted to, a large wave of sand rose up and blocked him. Next thing he knew, the Iwa-nin was knee-deep in sadistic sand that was hanging him upside-down in front of his target (who hadn't batted an eye).

The kunoichi hardened her gaze and activated her famed bloodline limit, sinking into the *Juuken* stance. Deidara told her not to do anything—yet—with a wave of his hand. Instead, he stared, upside-down, into the pale green eyes of his target.

"Who are you?" Gaara asked, his voice just as calm as it had been a moment earlier. The sand around his feet tightened, but Deidara just kept the grin plastered on his face.

"I'm Akatsuki, yeah." He chirped, and raised one hand in the detonating sign. One of the birds behind them exploded, and as the sand rushed back to protect him from the blast, Deidara was

released. He jumped backward to the edge of the balcony, tugging on his partner's sleeve to bring her back out of immediate range as well. (Then again, he wouldn't have known Gaara's immediate range if it smacked him in the face.)

The explosion unfortunately acted like a signal to all of the shinobi on guard, and woke up quite a few of the houses in the nearby vicinity. She pointed to their right, where a trio of ANBU were closing in on the situation, and Deidara had decided he'd had enough ANBU to last him a lifetime, and called one of his other birds over. It grew in another puff of smoke, and before anyone else could react, the pair were soaring above Suna.

"D-Deidara-kun, that wasn't very smart!" She admonished him, clinging to his arm on the unsteady bird. Once it got to a proper altitude, it stabilized, and she shyly let go of him.

He just shrugged in response. "Evidently neither of us were very smart, yeah. He knew." The blonde tightened his hair tie, and leaned over the bird's wing to look down at the scene. Sasori and Kabuto were screwed over if they got into that mess. ANBU and regular jounin were swarming around the Kazekage, who still seemed completely emotionless, the calm in the middle of the storm. Gaara was staring up at them, eyes narrowed slightly. "Hmm... I'm going to want to fight him on the ground, save clay... we need him alive, don't we, yeah?"

"Yes, Sasori said that..." She nodded fretfully, keeping her Byakugan active.

"I wonder why. This isn't just a normal assassination mission, that's for sure..." He turned back to look down at the scene, grinning as more and more lights blinked on and more shinobi came onto the scene. The newest Akatsuki member couldn't see Sasori or Kabuto (but with all of the ANBU on the scene, the silver-haired traitor could've easily blended in).

But then, suddenly, the strangest thing happened. No less than seven men below suddenly fell, and didn't get back up. But quicker than that, the ANBU had spotted the perpetrator. Somewhere along the line, Kabuto had lost his mask, and instead was smirking as he darted off into the city, practically half of the forces following him. Never one to waste an opportunity, Deidara scattered the remaining shinobi with a well-placed explosion.

(Sasori was still nowhere to be seen, that jerk.)

Deidara left her on the bird, and flat-out jumped back down onto the balcony as jounin, chuunin and ANBU alike were trying to clear the smoke and reorient themselves. Laughing to himself, the Iwa-nin ducked under a wild flail from one man, bringing up a kunai into his throat a second later. Two more ninja fell to kunai before the smoke from the explosion cleared.

The blonde hastily counted about eight or nine remaining, and then Gaara himself (who hadn't moved for any of it). The odds were not in his favor, but then again, when were they ever? Two ANBU, masked as a hawk and a rabbit, charged. Deidara just let his hatred for all things masked and mysterious flow down into his movements, whipping out a pair of kunai in each hand. One of them he pegged through the eyeholes, but the second one ducked the same barrage.

The hare-masked ANBU nearly decapitated him with an over-wide swing, but he jerked backward, turned it into a flip, and his heel caught her under her chin with a satisfying crunch. Swearing, the ANBU kunoichi attempted to backpedal out of the way of his next kick, but she couldn't dodge the following one. The force of it sent her flying into the tower's wall, and she didn't get back up.

Deidara didn't like hand-to-hand combat; it was the reason he became an explosives user. But he was running low on clay, having wasted two bombs already in Suna. He'd have to save the remaining amount for Gaara.

Speaking of the Kazekage, the blonde looked up just in time to jump out of the way of a wave of sand that very nearly caught hold of his ankle. The sand shifted and followed him upward, and Deidara called the bird with the Hyuuga on it to come down and catch him before the sand caught up with him. But just as he wrapped his arm around the owl's foot, a dark form from above jumped down and landed in the midst of all of the sand.

"Shit! Bya-chan, get back here!" He shouted in vain after her, watching with a wide eye as she performed that odd spinning attack she called the *Kaiten*. It kept the sand away from her long enough for her to dart forward, almost close enough to attack the redhead directly. But once again, his sand came up and protected him, blocking her at the same time. She twirled out of the way, but it reached out and caught her wrist, holding her.

Gaara emerged from the sand cave, looking positively demonic in the shadow it created. His eyes had widened, and a cracked grin adorned his previously impassive mask. Deidara swore again, and his remaining bird flapped down to attempt to rescue her. Some of the desert sand from below them reared up and impaled the clay bird through the chest before it could get close enough to do anything, however. The bomb detonated, harmlessly away from anyone, raining bits of clay and sand.

The blonde missing-nin jumped down from his bird, landing awkwardly on top of the sand dome above the Kazekage. The sand immediately shifted to throw him off balance, but either by a stroke of sheer luck or stupidity, Deidara *somehow* managed to fall *inside* the sphere—on top of Gaara. The sand gripping the Hyuuga's wrist instantly let her go and turned back in on itself to attack him. Deidara didn't have time to question it, and instead dodged the spikes and tried to land a solid kick or punch or hit on the surprised redhead.

The one time his knee made contact with his stomach, however, it hit something much too hard and rough to be any shinobi's belly. Sand around the area cracked and chipped away, and yet again, Deidara swore; *he was wearing the sand like armor*. Desperately, he called in his last active bird, and it made it to the opening in front of the dome before getting stopped.

"*Katsu!*" He shouted, and it exploded not two feet from them both.

The blast sent both of them through the back wall of the sand cave, Gaara into the Kazekage tower and Deidara over the edge of the balcony. He caught himself at the edge, and hauled himself back onto safe ground (barely, but it was better than going squish on the sand below), just in time to see his white-eyed partner start her own close-combat assault on the target.

She was using her traditional *Juuken* strikes, but they were hardly doing anything. In fact, they weren't doing anything except slowly chipping away at the sand armor. (And if this Suna-nin had as much chakra as she said he did, he doubt that a few *Juuken* strikes would seriously hinder him.) But better yet, it was keeping him mostly immobile. With her blocking his every movement and forcing him back against the wall with her gentle-but-forceful hits, it bought Deidara enough time to dip into his dwindling clay and start molding his art again.

But soon enough, Gaara got enough of an opening to push her back. The sand whipped around his arm and thrust into her stomach as a sharpened spike, impaling her cleanly and throwing her aside easily. She laid there limply, not stirring.

It killed Deidara inside to ignore her at this time, but he had to act before he could get more of his sand to rush to his defense again. This was a desperate time, and it called for desperate measures. Taking a bite out of his clay, the Iwa-nin chewed it as the mouths on his hands spat out another flock of clay birds. He flat-out *threw* them in Gaara's direction, still minimized and hopefully less noticeable. The redhead called up another sand shield, blocking all but two. The blocked ones

detonated on impact, creating enough of a distraction and tying up his sand to allow the two that got through to get closer.

Running over to check on the wounded kunoichi, the pair of mini birds exploded. Grinning in spite of his partner's situation, Deidara looked over his shoulder to see a furious Gaara, bleeding from a head wound and raising his hands for his sand to come back.

Kabuto, perfectly timed as always, appeared with a *Shunshin* and a swirl of his black traveling cloak. He was soaked in blood, but he didn't appear to be injured. "My, my, having fun here?" He asked calmly, ignoring the fact that a clawed arm of sand aimed for Deidara that missed nearly tore off his head.

"Heal her." He ground out, holding his shoulder where the clawed hand had *almost* completely missed. "Where's Sasori, yeah?"

"I'm not sure where Sasori-sama is." The medic replied lightly, indicating that he really did but didn't feel like sharing that information. He knelt down, wiping a stray lock of his red-dyed hair out of his eyes, and quickly assessed her injuries. Glancing back up, Kabuto deadpanned, "Don't you have a fight to be winning?"

Deidara, who had been watching and worrying, gave a guilty start and nodded. "Right. Yeah."

He turned, half afraid and half curious to see what had kept Gaara busy enough to allow that transaction. (It didn't matter what it was now; Deidara would have to distract him to allow Kabuto to heal the Hyuuga.) What surprised him was that a very familiar and a not-so-familiar puppet were assaulting the Kazekage, an amused Sasori sitting directly above them on the edge of the overhang. He, too, had blood splattered across his face, but didn't appear to be hurt. (Which was a bit of a let down.)

"Done having your chat, brat?" The redheaded Akatsuki member asked lightly, raising his eyebrows. He didn't have time to wait for a reply, however, as Hiruko's tail was ripped off by a giant hand of sand. Sasori frowned, and a black-cloaked puppet with black hair that Gaara looked furious about darted forward and something dark and dense streamed out of its open mouth.

"Who are you?!" The Kazekage demanded, glaring up at Sasori, who was hidden in shadows. "What did you do, desecrating sacred remains?"

"I'm just a puppeteer, having fun with my marionettes..." He replied with obvious amusement. The dark and dense stuff turned out to be some sort of *sand*, and it appeared to be stronger than Gaara's regular sand. Deidara jumped up and landed beside his Akatsuki partner, raising his eyebrow at a large scroll that was sitting beside him. Sasori glanced up at him, and before he could ask, explained, "I wanted some more reading material for the trip back. Shouldn't *you* be fighting this battle, not I?"

"So why are you?" The Iwa-nin retorted, and the art-nin sitting beside him shrugged. He made a few signs with his hands, and pulling a smaller scroll out from his sleeve, the puppets below disappeared and a sign appeared on the outside of the paper. Deidara blanched. "I didn't mean for you to *stop*, yeah!" He shouted, jumping down from the roof to fight his own fight.

Hinata awoke without realizing that she had fallen asleep in the first place. But after a moment, the situation leading up until now came flooding back, and she hastily jumped to her feet. Kabuto, who was kneeling beside her, tugged her back down. "Not so fast there. I've only healed your internal bleeding; you still have a large hole in you." The medic stated matter-of-factly.

She obediently sat back down, but activated her Byakugan. Deidara and Gaara were behind them, and it appeared that Sasori was above them. Odd, until she realized that he was just on the roof. Gaara's chakra didn't seem depleted or damaged in the least, whereas Deidara's looked like it was starting to feel the strain. His clay pouch was over half empty as well.

She noticed that Kabuto was covered in blood for the first time. "A-Are you—"

"—alright? I can assure you, this isn't my blood. I was just playing with the ANBU." He smiled innocently, the epitome of blamelessness. Hinata blinked, and decided not to think just how much fun he had with them. "Why are you so eager to join that fight again? It's going to turn into a blood bath soon." He paused, hands held over her stomach, and looked intently at her.

She looked away from his probing gaze. "I-I'm not going to let Deidara-kun fight him alone. Gaara is a demon."

Kabuto relaxed a bit, and smirked. "You have no idea." That remark caught her attention, but before she could ask, he stood back up, wiping his bloody hands on his pants. "That will hold you for the remainder of the fight. If you live, I'll finish fixing you later."

"You're reassuring."

"I try."

Hinata looked back at him, assessing him for a brief moment. "Kabuto... you're a mystery."

"At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I repeat: you have no idea." He smiled, his natural fake smile, and waved her away.

Miffed at being dismissed so easily, Hinata turned and easily molded herself back into the battle's rhythm. Ducking under a reflexive wave of sand and dodging a more purposeful one, she found that she couldn't progress any farther. Deidara and Gaara were fighting at surprisingly close range, and while the sand was having problems keeping up with the pair of them, it definitely wasn't going to let her get any closer.

Struck by a sudden thought, Hinata looked at the small streams of chakra swirling through the sand. The *Juuken* had stopped all forms of chakra she'd come up against thus far... could it stop it? Hesitantly, she forced her own chakra into her palm, thrusting it against the nearest wall of sand. For a split second, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the sand started to crumble away until it was a large, dusty pile.

But before the Hyuuga could celebrate, it sprang back up to life and created the wall again.

So it would only be a temporary break, she thought dejectedly. *And a short break at that.* But then again, whatever works! Perhaps a pause in the onslaught of sand was all they needed to turn the tide...

Hinata started to slowly work her way inward, toward the fighting pair. All too soon she found out that her hands weren't fast enough, and couldn't keep up with the ever-growing aggression of the sand. After a too-late duck that left her with a nasty scrape along her jaw and neck, she was forced to retreat. The kunoichi jumped up onto the overhang, landing lightly beside Sasori, who was

watching the fight below with evident amusement.

"It won't be long now... Deidara is starting to slow down. And I believe he's nearly run out of clay as well. The brat really doesn't know how to prepare, does he?" The redhead remarked, not sparing her a glance as she knelt down beside him, panting.

"Then why... aren't you... helping him...?" She rubbed her cheek, grimacing when her hand came away with a smear of blood.

"I have." He gave her a small shrug, keeping his eyes on the fight. "I'm waiting for the Jinchuuriki to *truly* start attacking. I think he's holding back because he wants to capture one of us for questioning. Either that, or he's tamed down since the attack on Konohagakure."

She winced again, and this time it had nothing to do with her injuries. Of course it would be impossible to hide the fact that the Sand and Sound attacked her village all those years ago, but for some reason, she hadn't thought that the Akatsuki had known... or that they weren't interested in it. Obviously she was incorrect in that assumption.

"If you don't... care about Deidara-kun... then why didn't you... kill him before?" Hinata asked in a moment of spite.

It was Sasori's turn to grimace. "I did try, you ignorant kunoichi. But Deidara was smarter than he looks, and Leader-sama had ordered me not to use my strongest puppets against him. Frankly I'm wondering why Deidara isn't trying in this fight, either—oh, there we go."

Hinata instantly looked downward to the fight, white eyes wide. Gaara had finally managed to get his sand wrapped around Deidara, and more of the redhead's weapon of choice was flowing onto the scene to further encase the blonde. The last thing she saw of him was his blue eye, widened with surprise. Then the Godaime Kazekage thrust one hand forward, in an eerily familiar movement.

"No—" She started, but the words below drown out her own.

"*Sabaku Kyuu.*" Gaara deadpanned, closing his fist as the sand in front of him compacted with a sickening crunch.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The games are stopped; no more playing with the prey. Gaara turns his aggressions onto Hinata, taking her betrayal of the Leaf as a personal wrong. Sasori sits by and lets it all happen. (Kabuto is an enigma, as ever.) Deidara is...well, what of Deidara? That Desert Coffin is quite the deadly thing, you know.

Stabilizing Things

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Standard disclaiming applies. I don't own the universe of Naruto, Kishimoto's concept of shinobi and their lives, Deidara, Hinata, the Akatsuki organization, or anything other than the three minor original characters featured so far. Nor do I make any profit off of this story, as much as I'd like to.

((2022 crosspost update: don't you miss when disclaimers like this were the standard defense for fanfic? i don't either.))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hmm. This could be a problem, Deidara thought blandly, staring at the sand in front of his face. Knowing his luck, he would have just milliseconds to live unless he could do something. But luckily, this Iwa-nin wasn't just a regularly dumb blonde; he was a genius! With a halfhearted grin, he swapped places with his handy little *Jibaku Bunshin*, and then stealthily leapt over to sit beside the Hyuuga and Akatsuki member on the roof, watching.

Predictably, the clay clone exploded when squeezed.

Crossing his legs, Deidara reclined in a relaxed way that he just wasn't feeling. Truth was, he was as tense as the kunoichi beside him (who jumped at his arrival). Sasori, on the other hand, didn't bat an eye. Predictably.

"It's all about predictability, yeah..." He murmured to himself, hanging upside-down over the edge to look for his target. Unless he got incredibly lucky, the redheaded bastard was probably just sitting somewhere, pissed. And the blonde must've been on some sort of streak, for his assumption was right; Gaara glared back up at him, arms crossed haughtily. Grinning and practically high with adrenaline, Deidara waved to him.

"You're Akatsuki?" Gaara asked dispassionately, dark-rimmed eyes narrowing.

"You won't live long enough to find out, yeah." Flipping over and swinging down to try to kick him, Deidara reached into his clay pouch for more ammo. Not only was the kick easily blocked by that accursed sand, and not only was the explosives expert swung around by his legs and thrown over the edge of the building, but his lucky streak suddenly ended.

The clay pouch was empty. Deidara was officially out of clay, and with a pissed Kazekage waiting above him, out to kill.

Landing on his feet from that height jarred his legs as well, but that was minor. Leaping back up onto the roof, Deidara scanned the situation quickly for something he could use. He had a grand total of two birds, already active and hovering above them, invisible in the night sky. His clay pouch was completely empty. Sasori and Kabuto were more likely than not completely useless in this fight, and he didn't want to send the dark-haired girl into that onslaught below them.

Speaking of such sand-related onslaughts, Deidara didn't have much time before it caught up with him again. And even as a genius, and even as Akatsuki, there was nothing he could do against

Gaara with just two birds. That sand was just too fast and too strong; he wished he'd had more information to begin with, as he could've used such handy little tips like that before wasting most of his clay. (But it was a suicide mission. He was given minimal information, because he didn't really need it. It stung his pride a bit, quite honestly.)

So it was taijutsu and regular ninjutsu against that beast below.

Or run like hell.

Calling down his two birds, Deidara stood back up and grabbed the kunoichi's wrist, yanking her up beside him. Sasori looked up at him, still sitting, irritation visible in his eyes. "And where are *you* going?"

"I'm running for it. I'd rather get punished by Leader-sama and live than face that demon down there, yeah." The blonde gave him a lopsided grin, jumping up with his partner onto one of the birds. "I couldn't win this fight to begin with, and we all knew that. It's best to flee now while mister sandman down there is still mostly in the dark about us."

Sasori didn't look any happier at this announcement, but slowly he nodded. "At least you have some semblance of common sense. Leader-sama won't be pleased with this... and if he doesn't kill you, I suppose you can always come back and try again."

He was thankful for the dark night, because he was sure he paled at the pessimistic suggestion. Chuckling nervously at his official partner's seriousness, Deidara replied, "I-I'll deal with that when the time comes, yeah. Now, are you coming, or do I get the joy of leaving you behind?"

"Even if you *did* leave me behind, you little brat, it'd only result in the destruction of my home village. Not I."

Sasori watched calmly as the bird—the two on still on it—was struck through the head by a large spike of sand. It crumpled and plummeted, and Deidara barely called the last one in in time before it detonated. The explosion ruffled the missing-nin's already messy red hair, but otherwise he didn't flinch in the least.

The pair, safely on the remaining double-winged hummingbird, fluttered back over to hover in front of him. Wordlessly, Deidara held out his hand to help him onto it, and the ever-randomly-appearing Kabuto slunk out of the shadows to join him. The blonde briefly considered ditching the medic and leaving him, but decided he owed it to him; he did, after all, lead all those ANBU away at the risk of his own life.

"How valiant of you, Deidara." Kabuto commented dryly, seating himself at his usual spot—the tail feathers. Sasori awkwardly settled down beside him, clearly uneasy about the whole flight-on-a-piece-of-animated-mud thing. Deidara grinned as he noticed that; he could get some fun in this night, after all.

"It was just as valiant of you leading all of those ANBU away, yeah." He replied airily, pleased when Kabuto frowned and looked away.

"I just wanted to have my share of the fun." He muttered under his breath, temporarily subdued. He was sure that if he'd really wanted to, the rogue medic could've come up with some equally snappish remark to reply with. But for whatever reason, he didn't, and Deidara felt a small swell of gratitude. (He really did *not* need any more distractions right now. Flying a dragged-down-by-weight bird through a dark sky while trying to climb higher and dodging random sand attacks was hard enough, thank you very much.)

Finally reaching an altitude above the clouds and where the air was thin enough that it had them all gasping, they were out of range of the attacks—and sight. It was a rather clean getaway. Deidara sunk down to sit on the bird's neck, throwing his legs over one of the sides. "Hah... finally."

"Leader-sama won't be pleased... that you ran." Sasori said, clearly noticing the lack of oxygen in the air as well.

"I'm flying... yeah." Deidara replied, panting. Maybe flying this high wasn't that smart, but he had no idea how far that sand could travel vertically. And with four people on the bird, they wouldn't exactly be speedy.

The night was still and silent—not to mention pitch black. They wouldn't be spotted now, even with all of the search lights the Suna inhabitants were vainly shining upward. The bird soared silently over the village's gates, and what he judged to be a kilometer out, the blonde lowered his art down to a more comfortable altitude. He hadn't ever flown that high before, and his head was feeling light and fuzzy from the lack of oxygen.

Deidara glanced back to see how the others were faring. Kabuto was mutely healing some of his own wounds, shifting his gaze to return the look. Sasori's eyes were lidded and he looked tired, but then again, he always looked that way. (The Iwa-nin almost hoped that his partner would fall asleep and fall off the bird. It would be entertaining, at least.) He didn't look back at the blonde, only kept his eyes on his knees, which were drawn up to his chest.

He couldn't see the kunoichi leaning on his back, but judging by the slow rate of her breathing, he surmised that she was either asleep... or had passed out from lack of oxygen. He really hoped it was the former. Shifting carefully as to not wake her, he did a cursory glance-over of the desert below them. It didn't look like anyone was this far out, and even if it was four people on a bird, they could still outrun most shinobi.

Deidara instead let himself relax—for the first time in three days—and let his thoughts drift. So he hadn't died. He managed to live through a suicide mission, even if he failed it. Leader-sama would've be happy about either of those things, no doubt. (Unless the mission turned out to be yet another test. He wouldn't put it past the man.) Sasori wouldn't be happy about that fact, either, especially if the blonde decided to tattle on him and disclose just what the redhead had told him. The Iwa-nin glanced back at Sasori again, narrowing his eye. Would the Suna-nin kill him—and the Hyuuga, more likely than not—just to cover up his slip? He wouldn't put *that* past him, either.

"Go down." Sasori looked up at him with the demand. Startled by his voice and half expecting an attack, Deidara jumped and the bird took a dangerous dive. Something heavy hit the Hyuuga's back, and with a surprised squeal, she was awake again. Her weight left his back, and he saw her out of the corner of his eye trying to help a fuming Kabuto back up onto the bird. Unfortunately, it appeared that the medic wasn't the only one thrown off balance by the bird's sudden fall; a split second afterward, with a rather ungraceful yelp, Deidara found himself nearly in the same predicament as Kabuto, pushed forward by Sasori falling on him.

Pushing himself back up and stabilizing the bird again, he shifted to see how the other three were. Sasori was still pressed against his back, looking almost as angry as his subordinate. The redhead glared up at him. Unable to resist, Deidara snapped, "You know, if you wanted to hit on me, you didn't have to throw us all off the bird to do so, yeah."

Ignoring the jab, Sasori pointed down below them. "Go down, you ass. Zetsu is down there."

Wondering how he could see anything in the dark night—and with Deidara in front of him blocking most of his view—the Iwa-nin made sure that the kunoichi and medic were both back

safely on the bird. (They were, thank the gods. Falling from this height wasn't something he particularly wished on anyone, even Kabuto.)

After several moments of not going down, just to get even with his partner, Sasori elbowed him in the side. "*Down*. Now, brat." The redhead hissed in his ear.

With a long-suffering sigh, Deidara dived down, having no idea which one Zetsu was and how he was supposed to find the guy. The Suna missing-nin pointed to a slightly darker spot on a rocky sand dune, guiding them down (because for the life of him, Deidara wouldn't have been able to). About halfway to the Zetsu-dot, Sasori rolled over and jumped off the bird, Kabuto following suit. The sudden weight shift caused another episode, and the pair unlucky enough to have been still on the bird found themselves head first in a sand dune.

"Bastard, yeah!" Deidara snarled, extracting himself from the sand. He swore that he never hated something as much as sand right then—unless it was Sasori. The redhead calmly ignored him, and performed a hand sign. In a whirl of sand, his Suna outfit was replaced with his Akatsuki uniform, and after adjusting it's collar, Sasori continued onward without a glance back to see how the other three had taken the landing.

-.-.-

Hinata pulled herself out of the sand with some help. Strong hands heaved her upward onto her feet, and looking over, she was immensely surprised that it was Kabuto, not Deidara, who had helped her. Blushing and hoping that the night would cover her red face, she stammered, "U-Uh, thank y-you, Kabuto-san..."

Hastily turning away from him to help hide her embarrassment, she found that her blonde partner was already halfway to Zetsu, chasing after Sasori and swearing at the top of his lungs. She wondered why he suddenly grew such a colorful vocabulary; he had never sworn that much while he was with her.

"Deidara is finally starting to form an actual relationship with Sasori-sama." Kabuto stated with a smirk. What that meant, she had no idea, but it looked like they were ready to kill each other again. "I'd suggest you try to stay out of their way. You were already caught several times in their crossfire."

Hinata blinked, dusting herself off. "So this 'Zetsu' is... another member? What is he doing all the way out here...?" She asked as they both walked casually after the Akatsuki members.

"Zetsu-san is the leader's messenger. Probably here to check up on them, and laugh at the fact that they failed the mission." He explained casually. He reached up to adjust his hair tie, and pushed his glasses further up on his nose.

True enough, by the time they got within hearing range, it was all shouting and laughing. Or rather, Deidara and Sasori were shouting while whoever this Zetsu person was was laughing. Hinata stiffened slightly when she realized who he was; he was the odd one with the large, leaf-like appendages and the dual voices. This was one of the first times she had seen him since that first fateful day in the organization, and she still wasn't used to him.

"*You little bastard, Sasori. I can't believe you told him that!*" The deeper, more gravelly voice

cackled loudly. The pair of subordinates stood awkwardly behind the Akatsuki members, unsure of whether or not to contribute to the rather one-sided conversation. "Leader-sama won't be pleased, you know."

"I know, *I know*, Zetsu!" Sasori hissed vehemently, crossing his arms. "I was expecting a death with this mission, but the brat proved me wrong."

"Well after this fiasco, I'm sure that Leader-sama won't appreciate it if you kill him—or tell him any more interesting facts about Akatsuki." Hinata tried hard not to stare at his monochromatic skin, or the way that only half of him would talk at a time. It was impolite to stare, after all. "*You are so screwed over. I can't wait to get back and tell Leader-sama...*"

"Yeah, you're gonna get what's coming to you." Deidara added with a feral grin. "You brought it on yourself, Sasori."

"Watch it, brat. I won't hesitate to—"

"*You can't kill him now, Sasori. Leader-sama won't let you until debriefing.*" The black half of Zetsu snickered, as his whiter half added, "You know protocol."

Hinata sighed minutely, thanking the gods that Deidara was safe from his own allies—at least until they got back. At least it was a small favor. Unfortunately, the soft sound only attracted Zetsu's attention, who looked over at her. She shrunk back unconsciously, regretting drawing any attention to herself.

"That's quite the injury you have there." He stated, and with a half grin, added, "*I bet you would taste lovely. Kabuto, don't heal her; I haven't had a kunoichi in ages.*"

"I'm sorry, Zetsu-san. I'm Sasori-sama's subordinate. I only take orders from him." The medic replied with a slight smile. Deciding he was the safest to hide behind, the Hyuuga did so, peeking out from over his shoulder.

"Speaking of Sasori," the redhead interrupted, clearing his throat, "He requests that the plant-based bastard retreats back to Leader-sama before things get nasty. Go and inform Leader-sama of Deidara's... living. And failure."

"Will do." With a mock salute, Zetsu closed the giant plant-like appendages around his head, and slowly sunk into the ground. Hinata stared after him, half amazed that he just did that, and half frightened of whatever else he could do.

Sasori was rubbing his temples, looking frustrated. "Looks like you're safe until after debriefing, Deidara. And if Leader-sama doesn't kill you, you can expect that *I* will." Reopening his brown eyes, he glared sideways at the blonde.

"After debriefing, Leader-sama will know what you told me, yeah." He responded with an arrogant smirk. "So killing me would be completely pointless, unless you like useless revenge. Yeah. And even then, Bya-chan would be the one to replace me."

"Over my cold, dead, lifeless body." He sighed, but in defeat. Deidara had a point, and all of them present knew it. Kabuto just coughed innocently from behind his hand.

Next Chapter: Hmm, I wonder what Kabuto was coughing at. Sasori and Deidara have to go to the dreaded debriefing with the Leader...I wonder how he'll take the failure and the fact that our favorite little blonde dragon is still alive? And what of Hinata?

Debriefing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Once upon a time, there was a fairytale.

But this wasn't quite your average fairytale. It was convoluted, perverse, anti-climactic and bizarre. The princess wasn't so innocent, the dragon wasn't so evil, and the knight wasn't so light. The princess had more than once taken on draconic qualities. The dragon had played the role of the knight as needed. The knight was currently missing-in-action.

In the princess' world, there were more dragons and dark things than actual knights. No one had come to rescue her, no valiant white knight on a noble steed. (Well, he had. Once. But he failed and she had yet to see him again.) But the strangest thing was that... the dragons weren't entirely evil. They were their own selves, with their own reasons and skills and feelings. Most people just tended to look at them as dark, evil creatures, rather than meeting with them or getting to know them.

Several of the dragons were rather nice—at least civil—toward the princess. But it was just because she was a gentle spirit; not because of her royal blood. It was refreshing for her.

Just when she was beginning to relax again around the dragons she had come to almost befriend, the princess was painfully reminded of how vicious and feral they were. They turned on each other and tore each other to threads, bloodthirsty but it was all in self-defense at the same time. Desperately worried about her dragon, the princess just shrunk back and tried to stay out of the crossfire. The matters of dragons weren't something to be trifled with.

-.-.-

This was the first time Deidara had set eyes upon the leader's face since his induction into the organization. If the leader's face consisted entirely of shadows, that is. Like a good little shinobi—it seemed that he spent a lot of time these days acting just like a good little shinobi should—the Iwa-nin schooled his features into one of impassiveness. On the inside, he was starting to panic about what he may be in for.

Sasori, on the other hand, was standing beside him and looking furious. It was one of the few times that the shorter ninja so openly expressed himself, though why he'd be stupid enough to do that in front of the leader of the Akatsuki, Deidara had no idea.

The answer came soon enough, as the shadowy man waved his hand dismissively. "No need for such uptight behavior, Deidara. I—and most likely Sasori as well—can read your expression just as easily when you think that you're hiding it."

The Iwa-nin didn't need any reminder that he was evidently the most incompetent ninja in the world to him right now. He looked appropriately humbled, but it was a ruse and the other two knew it.

The pair had told him their story, each of them doing their best to cast the other in a darker light.

Sasori had dispassionately outlined Deidara's abysmal fighting with Gaara, his failure to capture the target and complete the mission, and their crash-landing with the bird. The blonde, in turn, ratted out the Suna-nin on what he said about the leader, the conversation he had with Zetsu, and his refusal to help any of them out of that first (and following) sand trap.

During the whole thing, the leader hadn't said anything that might've given away his reaction to the fiasco. He'd asked a few questions, mostly to clarify some points, but for the majority of the debriefing stayed still and silent. He just watched them, eyes grey and dull in the dark room. It couldn't have been a good sign.

"So... Deidara-san..." He didn't like the use of the suffix. The leader leveled gazes with him, and the blonde Iwa-nin swallowed nervously. "You have failed your first mission in my organization. Do you have anything further to say for yourself?"

Panic was definitely present now. It was all he could do to stop himself from screaming or start throwing kunai and bombs. Slowly, Deidara shook his head. It felt like a death sentence.

And to make it worse, the leader didn't say or do anything for the longest time. It felt like an eternity. Then, suddenly, his arm twitched and there was a metallic thunk behind him. Deidara's visible eye widened, but he didn't flinch. A cut opened itself on his cheek, blood starting to dribble down. "You will try again in six months. This time it will be an *actual* mission, succeed or die. ...I suggest you spend your remaining time training."

Then with another dismissive wave of his shadowed hand, the leader of the Akatsuki let him leave. Deidara turned slowly, the panic still present, made worse by the small trickle of blood. He caught Sasori's gaze for a moment, and the redhead had the audacity to smirk.

Luckily for the blonde, as the case might've been, the leader spoke up and stopped him from doing anything about it. "I wouldn't act so flippant yet, Sasori. I have yet to deal with you. Deidara, go." His colorless eyes were narrowed slightly, adding to the aura of attention he commanded.

The Iwa-nin stalked out of the room, pausing only to glance at the kunai embedded in the wall, a droplet of his blood on the blade. He continued out, trying to calm himself down, and think rationally. It was a miracle he was still alive, he knew. The demolition artist forced himself to walk slowly and nonchalantly, though every cell in his brain was screaming at him to run.

But as he drifted farther and farther away from the leader's debriefing room, it became easier and easier to calm down. Soon enough, his heart rate was normal again and he had stopped panicking.

Look at me, reduced to a trembling genin by a cut and a threat, he reprimanded himself, eyelids drooping. His movements started to slow a bit, and Deidara no longer felt the need to hurry back to his room. The Hyuuga would still be there all day, awaiting word on the situation and worrying. True, it wouldn't be good to worry her... but he couldn't seem to speed up at all.

He stopped for a moment, rubbing the blood off of his cheek. The tongue on his hand experimentally licked at it, seemingly grinning up at him. Deidara stared at the small smear of blood on his hand, and suddenly the paranoid-shinobi side of his brain kicked into gear. His heart rate was continuing to slow, and his breathing was becoming labored—*Poison!* his mind squawked at him, and the small boost of adrenaline that came with the realization did little to nothing to curb his slowing.

"Sh-Shit..." He hissed, holding out an arm to steady himself by the wall. His sight was beginning to blur, even with his scope. The leader had poisoned the kunai, either to punish him, warn him... or kill him. With his numbed brain, he couldn't gauge the strength of the poison. *Does everyone in*

this organization use poison...?! He thought wryly.

Deidara stumbled down the hall, cursing himself for not being on guard. If he died now, from a pathetic scratch and a bit of poison, he would never forgive himself. Not to mention he'd be the laughingstock of the entire ninja world. The blonde was already pretty sure that he was going to be the butt of many jokes to come in the Akatsuki from his failed mission.

And this was not going to help matters.

Unable to keep himself standing, he sunk to his knees, leaning up against the wall. He tried to keep himself breathing at a normal rate, though his body was insisting that he didn't need as much oxygen anymore, compliments of the poison. And he didn't even have any clay...

Deidara fell forward onto his stomach, body paralyzed. His blue eye slid shut, once, twice, three times, each time with a longer break in between. He couldn't do anything for the poison. He could only hope that the kunoichi would find him in time, or that some other benevolent spirit would help him. (But that was impossible, he knew. He was in the *Akatsuki*, for gods' sake!)

A sandaled foot, toes painted purple, appeared in his limited range of vision.

Then the world faded to black.

Hinata had been fretting about Deidara for the seven and a half hours that they'd been back. (Even though he had been with her the first two; the leader hadn't called him down until then.) She'd paced, pushed her fingers together, tried to calm herself down, and once almost threw up when she thought of a few of the things that could have been happening to him. Truth be told, she still felt a bit queasy.

She wasn't cut out for the darker side of being a ninja. Anyone who knew her could tell her that, and she knew it as well. Which was why the shy heiress had never wanted to join the Akatsuki officially. Hinata tried her hardest, but when it came to the bloody, sinister shadows you gained as a shinobi, she couldn't stand it. She had always been protected and coddled, and she knew that part of her weakness was due to that, but most of it was due to her nature.

But the oddest thing happened. When she imagined Deidara, beaten, bloody and done so by the leader's hand... she could imagine herself as a true kunoichi. She wasn't squeamish about blood in large amounts, just when it was her causing the wounds. But if anyone hurt one of her precious people... so help her, she swore that she could get vicious. (She had yet to do anything of the sort, of course.)

Hinata stood up again, and begun pacing. It wasn't nice to have such dark thoughts, even if it meant that she was just protective of her friends. She turned on her heel and walked to the other end of the room, and back again. The sheltered Konoha-nin had no idea how long a debriefing like that should take, but surely it should've been over by now?

"That's it," She mumbled, looking around for her jacket. It was bloody and dirty and still had a large hole in it, but it was a comfort thing. Try as she might, though, Hinata couldn't find it. Just wearing fishnet underneath a tank top was *not* how she wanted to go out into the halls of the Akatsuki hideout, but unless she could find her coat, it looked like she would have to. If she

wanted to find Deidara, at least.

Finally, after several more minutes of frustrated searching, she had to give up on the jacket. She could find it later, anyway. Holding up her hands in a seal, she used a *Henge* to cover herself, the illusion-jacket comforting in its cover.

Hinata turned to go open the door, hoping against hope that Deidara was still alive and well.

But when she opened the door, she nearly walked into someone.

Hinata hastily backpedaled, staring down at her feet, mortified. Uchiha Itachi walked calmly into her room, supporting an unconscious Deidara. He dropped him unceremoniously on her bed, and withdrew his arm back into his cloak to rest it on the front button, as per usual. "I found him in the hallway, unconscious. I believe he fell for Leader-sama's genjutsu, and failed to notice the narcotic poison in his system." Itachi announced in a monotone, and she could feel his eyes on her.

Shyly, she looked up at him with a slight nod, expecting the red eyes of the Sharingan that had haunted her nightmares for the last month and a half. But instead, his eyes were cold, distant—and black. Pure, coal black, no hint of scarlet. Hinata had known that the Sharingan can be activated and deactivated, much like her Byakugan, but for some reason she had thought that he had kept his on at all times.

He didn't move, just stood there in her room, staring flatly at her. She fidgeted, unsure of what to say. Sorry? Thank you? I'm glad that you don't have your Sharingan on to renew my constant nightmares? "U-Um..."

"You're still as weak as ever." He stated dispassionately. "Do you even try to strengthen yourself?"

"I-I do." She replied, ashen eyes gluing themselves on her sandals again. Even without his main weapon, she couldn't bear to look at him. Itachi still scared the living daylight out of her, and they'd only met once before.

"You're failing miserably, then." He finally moved past her, toward the door. But pausing in the doorway, he turned back to look at her. She met his eyes once more, half-expecting another visit to the world of *Tsukuyomi*. "I believe that Deidara will try again to capture the Jinchuuriki of the Sand in six months. Until then, Sasori will be training him. I suggest that you try to train yourself as well so you do not drag him down with you. Leader-sama will kill him if he fails again."

Then, the stoic man was gone, closing the door behind him.

Hinata let out a breath that she hadn't been aware she had been holding. She didn't question how Itachi knew that, but instead was just grateful that he was gone. Even if he'd had the courtesy to warn her. Now she turned her attention to the unconscious blonde on her bed, whose breathing seemed abnormally slow.

Furrowing her brow, the Hyuuga activated her bloodline limit, and at once noticed that his heart wasn't beating as fast as it should be. (Which would make sense; Itachi had said that it was a narcotic-type poison...) Unfortunately, the Konoha kunoichi wasn't a medic. She'd only learned the raw basics from Sakura, and picked up one or two tricks from studying her clan's taijutsu and the way it affected a body. She had no idea what to do in the case of poison. And the only poison user she knew... was Sasori.

No, I'm not going to ask him for help... I don't even know where to find him! She used that as an excuse, letting her *Henge* drop to afford her better concentration. *I need a medic—Kabuto!*

Unfortunately, he hadn't been seen since the mission, and Sasori would have been her only link to him as well. It seemed that her only choice to help Deidara was to track down the redhead and either beg for help or offer a bargain. Grimacing, Hinata knew she had to do it. If only for Deidara.

The only problem was... she had no idea where he was. She knew he was also at the debriefing, but did that mean that he was in a similar position? What if she found him and he was unable to help? Or more likely, what if she found him and he didn't *want* to help? The mission to Sunagakure seemed to have created an even larger rift between the two... Which was not only impractical, but somewhat lamentable. They were *partners*! They had to work together, and the way to best work together was to create a special bond with your partner.

The dark-haired girl adjusted Deidara, making sure he wouldn't fall off the bed, and hastily ran out the door to track down her possibly least favorite Akatsuki member.

The first place would be, logically, to check his room. And though it took her nearly a quarter of an hour to find it, he wasn't there. And on the way she had checked the kitchen; he wasn't there, either. So where was he? Was he really still with the leader, or was he in some obscure place she didn't even know about? What if the leader had killed *him*...?

Hinata jogged down the corridor, looking around for any sign of Sasori. She spotted Kisame and that odd masked member, but aside from that, she saw no one in the maze-like dwelling. So many shut and locked doors she passed, too many to be member's rooms or other normal rooms. But then again, why should the Akatsuki pretend to be normal?

She turned a corner, and then got one of the biggest surprises of her life. Down at the far end of the hallway, one of the members stood, one of them whom she had never seen before. The member turned and looked at her with a flat gaze, wiping a lock of azure hair out of dark-rimmed eyes. The cloak was tucked in at the waist, revealing hips and a chest... *there was a female Akatsuki member*. Hinata stared down the corridor at her, her own white eyes wide. The blue-haired kunoichi looked at her for a moment longer, then turned and disappeared.

A woman?! For some reason, Hinata had thought it impossible that a kunoichi had gotten into the infamous organization. At any other time, no matter how risky it might've been, she would've chased down the mysterious blue-haired kunoichi, but now was not any other time. Now she was on a time limit... though how long it was she had no idea.

Vowing to sometime meet this lady, or at least attempt to, Hinata continued her search with only half a mind on her goal. Somehow she had never expected to meet another kunoichi tied to the organization. And she was definitely a member with the cloak. Knowing that she had a female Hokage, the Hyuuga felt that she shouldn't be that biased against her own gender. But perhaps from personal experience, or perhaps upbringing in her clan, or perhaps being raised under a male Hokage, she didn't know, but she had not been expecting to see a woman this high up in the power chain.

Doors and rooms and halls slipped by, almost unseen by the distracted girl. Frankly, she felt a bit... excited about having female company. The last time she'd talked to another girl was... at Usuki's house, well over a month ago. Hinata missed Konoha and her friends more than ever at that point, and just when the longing was starting to fade.

After another hour of searching, three more times checking Sasori's room and running into Itachi again brought up nothing. Sasori was nowhere to be found. Worriedly, the dark-haired heiress made her way back to her room, having no idea what she could do for her friend. She refused to even think of the possibility that he might've already died.

She opened the door to her room and was met with quite the surprise; Deidara was gone.

Reflexively activating her Byakugan, she confirmed it. There was no one in her tiny little room save herself. Expanding her focus, it didn't seem that the unconscious Iwa-nin was anywhere nearby, either, but her range wasn't particularly large so it didn't really narrow anything down. Now slowly approaching distraught, Hinata ran back to Sasori's room, hoping against hope that the redhead had him. No such luck.

Next she tried Deidara's own room, her dwindling supply of faith hoping valiantly that he was there. Somehow, some way, she hoped that he was there... and still alive.

There was someone in Deidara's room, at least. She jumped into a run, narrowing her concentration. Whoever it was had a slow heartbeat, but not as slow as the poisoned Iwa-nin's had been. Whoever it was was either incredibly calm or sleeping.

-.-.-

When the kunoichi burst into the room, Sasori couldn't help but smirk to himself. She just stood there a moment, surprised that Deidara was back in his room, sleeping peacefully. The redhead slowly closed the door behind her, crossing his arms with the barest hint of a smirk when she whirled around to look at him.

"Surprised?" He asked flatly.

But she was evidently sharper than he had originally thought. She just blinked once, and replied, "Why did you heal him?"

Sasori narrowed his own eyes a fraction. Nonchalantly, he said, "Leader-sama requested that the brat be taken under my wing for the next six months. That and said that if Deidara dies, I will die as well." No use lying; it wasn't like she could do anything with that information, anyway.

"You're going to be training him for the next six months?" The little Hyuuga girl asked, looking innocently meek. He'd underestimated her.

"Yes. Leader-sama will not let the Jinchuuriki of Suna go that easily; that mission was just a warning." It was a bit of a white lie, but he did not want to speak about the inner workings of the organization with this pathetic little kunoichi. "Deidara will try again in six months. If he fails again, he will be killed."

"That's what Itachi-san told me..." She mumbled with a soft sigh.

Sasori didn't let that faze him; Itachi was always finding things out that he didn't need to know. Such things didn't concern the Uchiha, anyway. But it was best to keep them apart. "I wouldn't listen to a lot of what the Uchiha says. He's biased."

She looked up questioningly at him, but he wouldn't elaborate on the subject. If she wanted to know so badly, she should ask Deidara. That would hopefully get the Iwa-nin thinking for himself. "So... I gather you were looking for *me*?"

"Y-Yes. Did you... you took out the poison, didn't you?" She glanced back nervously at the sleeping blonde. Sasori nodded curtly.

"I have a question for you, kunoichi." Her white eyes darted back to look at his feet, not daring to look any higher. "You didn't notice me with your Byakugan, did you?"

"No...?" She frowned a bit, probably wondering about that for the first time.

"I see." Because of his abilities, and with the simple matter of masking his chakra, he had fooled the infamous Byakugan. Interesting indeed.

"Wh-What... *are* you?" She asked quietly. Obviously this question had been gnawing at her for awhile, but the redhead wasn't going to give up his secrets that easily.

"An artist." Sasori answered with a mysterious smile.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh Jashin, what will Leader-sama think of next? Our heroes now have a mere six months to try to train the newbie up to par-but what about the princess? She doesn't seem to keen on the whole idea. And what of this mysterious blue-haired kunoichi? And what about Itachi being 'biased'...? Hmm, curiouser and curiouser...

A Jinchuuriki's Secret

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I just want to talk to Sasuke!" Neji shouted, leaping out of the way of the massive sword. His Byakugan was on, but it seemed that his opponent's speed made it virtually useless. "Damn it, get out of the way!"

"Not a chance." Suigetsu grinned broadly, using his forward momentum to swing the zanbato around for another try at the Hyuuga prodigy. Said prodigy dodged again, spotting his attack from a mile away with those accursed eyes of his. "Sasuke-kun doesn't need *your* help anymore."

"But I need his! Just let me—talk to him!" Neji had managed to duck under the following swing, but not the free hand that reached up to grab his throat the next moment. The pale-haired Kiri-nin had managed to catch up to him (which would never have happened if the Hyuuga hadn't been wasting all of his breath trying to reason with the savage, of course). The brunette glared down at him, wincing slightly as he tightened his grip on his neck.

"Now... to have some fun. I think I'm going to break the norm and give you some special treatment, eh, Hyuuga?" He grinned viciously, leaning his elbow on the sword's hilt calmly. "Before I cut off those speedy little legs of yours... I want to cut out your *eyes*. They've been bugging the shit out of me for too long." His grin darkened, and he reached down with his free hand for a kunai. "I will carve out those freaky white eyes nice and slow... you're right-handed, right? Your right eye goes first, then..."

Neji continued to remain calm—though glaring. "*Kaiten!*" Spinning while someone had a hold on your neck wasn't exactly fun, but he'd settle for bruises and some scratches any day compared to what he would have received otherwise. The Hyuuga tore himself away from Suigetsu, who scowled and dropped the kunai, favoring his new sword once more. "I will ask you *once* more! Where. Is. Sasuke?"

"Like I know." The fanged ninja shrugged, chuckling. "What am I, his keeper?"

"You mean you don't know—"

"Though if I were you, I'd look behind you." He pointed past Neji's left shoulder, and before it could barely register with the Byakugan, a hand was laid on the surprised Konoha-nin's same shoulder. After a beat, his chakra became visible; that's just how fast the Uchiha was, evidently.

"Sasuke." Neji stated emotionlessly, staring straight ahead, but focusing with his bloodline limit on the active Sharingan glaring at the back of his head.

"What do you want?" The red eyes shifted to look past him, at Suigetsu. "Suigetsu, what are you doing?"

"I was just following that lead I told you about and out of nowhere this freak attacked. I was only playing with him." He replied innocently, adjusting the belt around his chest. "He said he wanted to talk to you."

"So you managed to do something about that seal of yours?" Neji asked, trying not to smirk. Sasuke jerked him around to face him, and the two bloodline limits met. The seal on Sasuke's shoulder was still there, no doubt about it, but it somehow seemed more... passive. Less

aggressive, at any rate, and it wasn't eating up nearly as much chakra any more.

"What do you want?" He repeated warningly.

The pair hadn't seen each other for nearly two months, and this was their reunion. Typical.

"I have a favor to ask."

"Then no."

"I need help getting into the Akatsuki. I think Deidara has already gotten in; I can't get Hinata-sama." Neji explained regardless. "I can help you find Itachi."

"I don't need any help." The avenger received a flat look, so he elaborated, "I have plenty of help already." With his Byakugan, the Caged Bird looked back to where Suigetsu was drinking loudly from one of those annoying bottles of his.

"I can spot Itachi before he can spot us, even if he is Akatsuki. Face it, Uchiha, you'd *need* my Byakugan if you want to even attempt to find your brother." He pointed out matter-of-factly.

"I have a much better tracker than you could ever hope to be. You weren't made for reconnaissance, Hyuuga."

"Are you telling me that *that* thing can *track*?" He jerked his head back toward the swordsman, who was humming some inane tune and twiddling his fingers boredly.

"Actually," Suigetsu called over, indicating that he could hear them both quite well, "We were just on our way to find that tracker of yours. But I'm all for the Hyuuga if you wanna switch, Sasuke-kun." He chirped, a bit too cheerfully. Neji had to wonder *who* this hunter-nin was supposed to be if the Kiri-nin would willingly trade him in for the Hyuuga.

"Juugo said that we shouldn't stick to sight-based tracking. The Byakugan can be fooled." Sasuke replied, earning a scowl from Neji.

"And who is Juugo? What *have* you been doing these past few weeks?"

"I was doing something about this seal of mine." The Uchiha avenger said sourly, scowling as well.

-.-.-

Juugo turned out to be a veritable *giant*, but Hyuuga were trained not to be intimidated easily. Neji barely came to the man's chin, and he was fairly tall himself. He was tall and more muscularly built than most shinobi, so the brunette also had to wonder what he could really offer to Sasuke's little 'team'. He had spiky ginger-colored hair, and the same colored eyes that just regarded Neji coolly.

"Juugo, this is the Hyuuga. Hyuuga, this is Juugo." Suigetsu said lamely, gesturing to them both in turn. Sasuke stood idly on the sidelines, obviously wondering why he had allowed himself to be talked into this negotiation. His Sharingan was still active, and his eyes hadn't left Neji since they reunited.

The two stoic shinobi stared each other down, neither of them speaking. The brunette knew he

wasn't going to lose this staring contest; Hinata—and his pride—depended on it. The stakes were too high for him to even considering losing. But equally the redhead seemed just as determined.

"Well this is nice. I can feel the love; I'm sure they're bonding." Suigetsu stated flippantly, and then hastily took a long drag on his drink with Sasuke's glare turned on him.

"So... you have the Byakugan." It wasn't a question, it was a statement. Juugo had spoken first, but he was still attempting to stare down the shorter ninja. Neji just nodded stiffly. "What is the range of sight you have?"

"About a kilometer." He replied, just as stiffly. It was the second longest range in the history of his clan, and he was proud of it. And that wasn't a small amount; in shinobi measurements, a kilometer could make all the difference. The Hyuuga could only hope that his only bargaining chip was enough for this massive man.

-.-.-

Deidara woke up with the worst headache. It felt almost like a hangover, but much, much worse. The blonde just laid there, deciding to try to fall back asleep to sleep it off. But his head was pounding and his whole body felt stiff and sore; he wouldn't get any sort of rest like that.

Eventually, it pierced through his pain-clouded mind that he wasn't going to get anything done, progressive or otherwise, while he was just laying there like a lump. With a groan, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, rolling back his shoulders and cracking all of the joints he could manage. Just that simple movement hurt, but it also seemed to loosen him up a bit.

The blonde shakily got to his feet, wondering where his cloak and sandals went off to. Or his shirt, for that matter. And pants. Pants would be nice, even if it felt nice just sleeping in boxers for once. Then it slowly dawned on him that while he was still sore all over, he didn't *hurt* in any of the places where Gaara had injured him. He had been healed at some point.

After the mission had been the debriefing, and he definitely hadn't gotten any medical attention then. After that... it was a blank. "...Huh. That's weird, yeah." Deidara shrugged it off, and decided to go look for his kunoichi partner. She was probably to thank for his wound-free state.

Finally digging up some semblance of an outfit (really it was just pants and his cloak) and giving up on finding his sandals after scouring the whole room, the chipper blonde finally left. But as he was closing his door, he spied a note attached to it. Ripping it off and scanning over it—hoping it was from the Hyuuga—Deidara was sorely disappointed to find out that it was from Sasori.

"'Brat, after you wake up come down to my room. We have a few matters to discuss. Sasori.' Yeah, like I'm going to do that. Now where's Bya-chan..." He snorted and crumpled it up into a ball, tossing it nonchalantly behind him as he walked off. Conveniently, her room was in the opposite direction as the puppeteer's.

Even more conveniently, he met her in the hall halfway there.

She was missing her usual jacket, and was instead wearing a copy of her normal undershirt. Deidara had to remind himself not to stare down it. "O-Oh! Deidara-kun, you're awake!" She exclaimed in pleasant surprise. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, thanks for healing me up like that." He replied, giving her a thumbs-up. She raised an eyebrow, looking confused.

"I didn't... I mean, I wanted to, but after Leader-sama poisoned you, I couldn't help. Sasori-san was the one who healed you." She whimpered, biting her bottom lip. That caught the blonde off guard. He hadn't expected his bastard of a partner to help him with anything! His mind went back to the note, wondering what he had wanted... and then his mind caught up with her words.

"*What?! Leader-sama poisoned me, yeah?!*" Deidara yelped.

After many comforting and calming words, she managed to talk him into following the note's directions; Sasori would explain everything, she soothed. He knew more about the situation than she, and more about their current one as well. When he asked her what she meant by that, she just shrugged helplessly and looked away nervously. The kunoichi pushed her fingers together fretfully.

By the time they reached the Suna missing-nin's door, Deidara felt ready to blow up the entire organization and the dark-haired girl beside him looked ready to pass out from the effort it was taking to stop him from creating said explosion. Kicking the door down, the blue-eyed blonde stomped into Sasori's room, crossing his arms haughtily as he flopped down on the bed.

Sasori looked up from his desk, some sort of tool in his mouth and one of Hiruko's tail joints in his hands. He didn't seem pleased by the rude interruption, but Deidara didn't particularly care at that moment. The kunoichi hastily skittered across the room and perched on the edge beside him, red-faced. "I see you didn't come directly to *me*. I don't think the kunoichi needs to know more about the group than what she does already." He sniffed, spitting out the tool and setting the curved piece of metal down delicately.

"Bya-chan is as much a part of this hellhole as I am, yeah." He snarled savagely, daring Sasori to make a comment on his mood. (The girl looked ready to faint.) Obviously the redhead only found it amusing.

"I find it interesting that you don't bother censoring your language around her any longer." He stated with a faint smirk. Deidara put on a properly chastised face, but didn't say anything. "So... You don't remember much about yesterday, do you?"

"*No*." He replied shortly. The kunoichi wrapped her fingers around the back of his hand comfortingly, though her white eyes were on Sasori.

"Let's get the basics down first, then. You have six months until you attempt to capture the Jinchuuriki again. If you fail again, you will die. Leader-sama suggested, quite correctly, that you should use this valuable time to train and hone your skills and hopefully become more than sub par to our level." He crossed his arms, adjusting the cloak's high collar. "Leader-sama has regrettably put *me* in charge of such training, but—"

"Question. Yeah." Deidara raised his arm, pulling up his legs onto the bed and sitting cross-legged. The redhead obviously didn't like the interruption, but he allowed the blonde to speak. "Why did he even send us on that first mission, then? It's pretty stupid to go so soon after *that*, yeah."

"...Leader-sama said that that was supposed to be a 'warning' for the Jinchuuriki." Sasori's dull brown eyes flicked over toward the kunoichi, but he seemed to have no problem with her presence... yet.

Deidara's arm stayed up, and after a moment he asked, "And what is a 'Jinchuuriki', yeah?"

There was a long pause, and finally Sasori groaned. "Oh dear gods, I knew that some villages were idiotic but I hadn't thought Iwa had sunk that far..." Setting his head in his hands, he grumbled to the floor, "A Jinchuuriki is a person—usually a shinobi—that contains a demon bound to his or her soul. The demon being one of the nine tailed beasts—Ichibi, Nibi, Sanbi, et cetera. In return for being said host, that Jinchuuriki is granted amazing skills and powers, and massive amounts of chakra. Leader-sama is hunting down these nine Jinchuuriki, for reasons that I don't think I'll inform you of quite yet." He raised his head slightly, looking at both of them. Another glance to the Hyuuga girl, this time much more obviously disdainful. "We have two right now, and know the locations of three others."

"G-Gaara is a Jinchuuriki...?" She asked meekly.

"*Obviously.*" He replied scathingly. She ducked her head, hiding her no-doubt reddening face from them both. "Every member has been assigned one of those Jinchuuriki to capture. The Ichibi—'Gaara'—has been assigned to Deidara."

"And who's yours, yeah?" The Iwa-nin asked with a smirk.

-.:-

A sudden thought struck Hinata. She had been wondering about Itachi's genjutsu, and how the Naruto in it had turned into a monster resembling the Kyuubi. Surely Sasori would know something about that, if the Akatsuki was so interested in the tailed beasts?

But the redheaded artist was currently having a glaring contest with the blonde one, and she could tell that it wasn't going to end any time soon.

"I don't *have* one yet, brat. And my role in the organization is not to be questioned by ignorant minors." But Hinata couldn't help but notice that Sasori answered pretty much all of his questions, regardless of his declaration not to give any valuable information away. He turned his head to glare at the far wall, deeming his partner unworthy of continuing the match with him.

"U-Um... Sasori? What do you know a-about the Kyuubi... Is it a Jinchuuriki?" She had thought it was rather astute of her to realize that not all of the demons could have been bound to humans, and at any rate thought it wise to ask. Sasori, on the other hand, hadn't thought as much.

"The Kyuubi... ah, I see. That was the only one Konoha managed to get, wasn't it?" He mused airily, smirking. Narrowing his eyes imperceptibly, he asked, "And are you wondering if you know him?"

Unfortunately for Hinata, Deidara chose that moment to interrupt again. "What do you mean 'get', yeah? Are these some sort of prizes?" He asked suspiciously.

"As you could imagine if you actually *thought* about it," The redheaded Akatsuki member didn't seem to like the interruption either. "With a demonic level of chakra and unique skills and jutsus given to the Jinchuuriki, they are quite powerful. During every single past war, the villages have strived to capture and control them, using their power to sway the battles. Konohagakure is the village to most recently acquire one, so they haven't had the chance to use theirs in a war as of yet."

"And that would be why Leader-sama wants them, yeah?"

"...Something like that..."

The heiress wouldn't give up, however. Sasori obviously knew who it was, and confirmed that the Kyuubi's Jinchuuriki was a Konoha native. It would drive her crazy if she couldn't find out who it was now. "So who is it...?"

"A boy, about your age, I believe. He's currently in Konohagakure, under the protection of two of the Sannin—the ones Deidara *hasn't* killed yet—and the Copy Nin. Itachi has been assigned to capture him." Noticing how it was gnawing at her, he chose to drag it on as long as he could. Only his evasion of the question had captured Deidara's curiosity as well, so both of them were now staring at Sasori with wide eyes and bated breath. "I believe his name is Uzumaki Naruto."

The name obviously didn't mean much to the blonde, as he just sat back and frowned, wondering why it wasn't as big of a surprise as he'd thought it would be. Hinata, on the other hand, felt like she'd been punched in the stomach.

She couldn't believe it. She'd had her suspicions, and had always wondered why the adults seemed to treat him with such disdain, and had been awed at his sheer amount of chakra... But having it told to her like this, flatly and without any of his comments on the subject... it really was as if she'd had all the wind knocked out of her. The boy she'd admired and even *liked* romantically for all those years... was a demon inside.

She had been born after the attack on Konohagakure; she was raised her entire life to fear and hate the Kyuubi. It was inbred in her. She felt almost... betrayed. By her clan or by Naruto, she had no idea. But she couldn't help but remember all of those awful stories she'd heard growing up, about the Kyuubi no Kitsune, the massacre that came with it, all of the death and blood and devastation... and the death of her village's favorite and beloved Hokage, the Yondaime. *Naruto* had been the cause of that...?

"N-Naruto... kun..." She breathed, completely at a loss for what else to say.

Deidara glanced over at her, a sudden realization dawning on him. "Wait... are you saying that that one kid you called 'Naruto' was the Kyuubi? Yeah?" He looked incredulous, shocked even. "I've fought him! The blonde with the whiskers and all of the shadow clones, yeah?" The blonde drew lines across his cheeks with his fingers, imitating the whiskers of the Jinchuuriki. Sasori, likewise, looked shocked at this.

"*You* have fought him? When?" He spluttered, eyes widening from their normal flat stare. Clearly this situation was a surprise for them all.

"When I had first taken Bya-chan from Konoha, yeah. Her first rescue squad was that Jinchuuriki, some pink-haired chick, Hyuuga Neji and Uchiha Sasuke." Deidara nodded once, but then turned back to the blank-eyed girl.

Hinata couldn't believe it, pure and simple. There was no way *her* Naruto had done all those awful and horrible things as the Kyuubi. It couldn't be true. But it would explain his role in the *Tsukuyomi*... and that red chakra and the changes he went through when he got angry... Naruto *had* to be the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki. There were too many similarities for it to be a lie. But then... why didn't he *act* like it? Had he been lying about his cheerful attitude, sunny disposition, all these years?

Even the smallest doubt made her rebel against the idea. Naruto *couldn't* be a demon. He just couldn't be.

"And you... fought him." Sasori repeated in disbelief. "...Does Itachi or Leader-sama know of this?" She felt more than saw the blonde shake his head. "I think you ought not to tell them, Deidara." The ex-Suna-nin said seriously, and while it sounded like a rather big proclamation, Hinata had no time for such trivial things. (After all, *she* wasn't in the Akatsuki.)

Naruto... she couldn't bring herself to add the affectionate suffix, even in her thoughts. *Are you really the demon that nearly killed our village?*

"...Bya-chan?" She felt Deidara's gaze, and it seemed that he had only now caught onto her emotional turmoil. "Did you know this guy, yeah...?"

"Enough talk of the Jinchuuriki. The Kyuubi is none of your concern; yours is the Ichibi. Which you will *have* to capture alive in six months." Sasori stood up, though the blonde sent him a nasty glare for ignoring the kunoichi. "Stand up, brat. Leave her alone; I think your priority should be getting stronger."

But Deidara didn't move. He put his arm hesitantly around Hinata's shoulders, partly to spite his partner, partly to comfort his *true* partner. She felt bad for getting in between them, especially coming between the Iwa-nin and his training, but somehow she needed comfort. She could *not* have been in love with a demon... it couldn't be possible.

"Deidara, *come*." The tone of voice didn't allow any room for arguments. Slowly Deidara gave her a quick, one-armed hug, and stood up. He crouched down and tried to look into her face, but she just looked away. Sasori tapped his foot impatiently. "We've wasted enough time."

"G-Go, Deidara-kun. I'm... alright." She forced a small smile, shooing him. Hinata wasn't going to be the cause of her partner's death if she could help it. She'd just have to comfort herself, is all.

"Okay... yeah..." He sounded unconvinced, but was (literally) dragged out the door by the shorter-nin. "I'll come back in a bit, Bya-chan! Yeah!"

Hinata just sighed, and leaned back against the wall. She didn't feel like leaving Deidara's room; even in the short while they'd been here, the room had taken on his qualities and personality. It was comforting, really. But she knew she'd have to get back to her own bedroom soon enough, if only to prevent Sasori from yelling at them both. Neither of them needed more stress.

But she didn't want to leave his room. The blankets below her that she was sitting on were warm from their body heat, and she unconsciously pulled up a corner to cover her knees. Leaning her head on them, she noticed that the blanket smelled like him as well.

Naruto was the Kyuubi. The Jinchuuriki of it, at any rate... but it was the same thing, wasn't it? What if his friendly and ambitious behavior had all been a façade...? What if he *had* been a weapon like Sasori had said? Was Uzumaki Naruto really just the Kyuubi, controlled by Konoha? Hinata couldn't believe it. But shinobi were trained to adopt false personalities and could fake emotions quite easily... What if *everything* about him had been a ruse?

Ten minutes later, Hinata found herself in the kitchen, making herself some comfort tea and wrapped up in Deidara's blanket.

Next Chapter: Oh my gawd, Hinata knows Naruto's secret! Without hearing his side, she doesn't seem to take too kindly to it...but what of Deidara? His training starts, and how tough will it be on the inexperienced dragon? And what will become of our princess during those long, six months? Better yet, wth is up with Neji?!

Training Daze

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first month made it clear that this wasn't going to be easy training. Sasori was ruthless, cruel, and had a horrid sense of humor. And while Deidara could admit that he could see a certain method to his madness, it didn't mean he agreed with it. They (or rather, *he* did; the redheaded bastard just watched and corrected) trained sunup to sundown, and by the time he was staggering back into his room, he was too tired to do anything other than maybe shove something down his throat to eat and then sleep. He hadn't seen the Hyuuga in that whole month.

The first day, Sasori had led him outside and pointed to the large, steep, cliff-like mountain that their current lair was located under. Deidara had stayed sullenly silent, still pissed over having to leave her in such a state. But to protect them both, he'd have to comply with the rules... for now, at least. The puppeteer nodded toward the mountain, and for one gleefully arrogant moment, the Iwa-nin had thought (*or hoped*) that he would have to climb it.

"You have ten minutes. Start running." He'd said instead, which startled the blonde—but that was still vastly too easy. Either Sasori was purposely underestimating him to piss him off, or he'd honestly underestimated the quality of Iwa jounin. Deidara had grinned at him, and did a quick stretch. But then the stoic Akatsuki member had added, almost innocently, "I want ten laps."

The rest of the month had just been as hellish as that.

Sasori had based their training off of a very simple, yet astute, observation. "You are a long-range bombs specialist, Deidara. Thus you are an idiot for even *attempting* to learn taijutsu. You need to work on your speed, your ninjutsu, and only *after* those are up to par will you level out your taijutsu and possibly genjutsu to cover any weaknesses in your usual strategy. But until then, for gods' sake, *stick to your strengths*. Don't embarrass us all." Well, the first sentence was the astute observation. The rest of it just went through one of the Iwa-nin's ears, and out the other. He'd come to learn that he only had to listen to half of what Sasori had to say, much to the latter's irritation.

Today he was supposed to do those ten laps around the whole mountain again. Deidara glared at the shorter artist, stretching himself slowly. He was half tempted to just make a clay bird and see if he could fly around in that amount of time, but no doubt Sasori would attempt to shoot him down.

"Sasori, I don't think I can even *fly* around that thing ten times in ten minutes, yeah. Why do you insist on running me ragged trying it?" He groused, yet again trying to get out of it.

"First off, a bit of respect for your elders, *brat*. As of right now, everyone else in the organization are your superiors and should be treated as such. I've had it with your disrespect; you don't deserve to have any pride unless you may back it up with your pathetic excuse for art." Of course Sasori ignored his question and insulted him again. The worst part was, aside from the usual retort of the fact that the redhead was *obviously younger* than him, Deidara couldn't really talk back to him. He had a point.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, Sasori-sama." But as long as he could put off that horrible running, he was okay with letting the Suna-nin get his way—for now.

"I thought you'd be more original than that, Deidara. Being an *artist* and all." Sasori smirked, rolling his eyes. The blonde twitched slightly in indignation; couldn't the asshole leave his art

alone?!

"Oh, shall I call you danna then?! Sasori-*danna*, yeah? You little bastard, you just have some sort of complex because you're short." He snarled, crossing his arms with a huff. He got a rock thrown at him for his effort.

Deidara had to run twenty laps that day, much to his utter horror.

Almost an hour after that argument, the Iwa-nin dragged himself over to the nearest rock and draped himself gracelessly over it. He held his hand out limply, and at least his 'danna' had the foresight to hand him his water bottle. A Deidara dead from heat stroke and dehydration would probably not be a good thing to explain to the leader.

"Where'd your shirt go?" Sasori sat down on the dirt next to him, still fully in his uniform, despite the blazing sun overhead. Deidara had ditched the cloak long ago, as well as most of his other clothing.

"It—it's on... some tree... on the other... side of... the moun... tain..." He panted, rolling over onto his back. His hair stuck to his sweaty skin, much to his annoyance.

"You didn't need to strip just for a little jog." His partner stated idly, examining his nails. "I could've run that easily without even taking my uniform off." He couldn't resist including, adding insult to injury.

But Deidara couldn't muster the energy to reply, so he just laid there, half-dead, instead. It was much easier to do. After he regained some semblance of his usual respirational rate, the sweaty shinobi asked, "Sasori... danna... why do I even have to... run those stupid laps... yeah...?" He added the 'danna' in on purpose. If he'd have to 'show respect' to him, damn it, he was going to make sure it got annoying fast.

The puppet user glanced at his partner's empty water bottle, sighing. "Because you need to be taught respect. That, and as a long-range jutsu specialist, you need to be fast. You're not."

"How do you know...? What if I'd been holding back in all of my fights, yeah?" He asked, fishing around for Sasori's water bottle. If he could get his hands on it, the Suna-nin wouldn't see a drop of water in it.

"That would just be stupid. And even if you were, I highly doubt you'll even come close to Akatsuki level. Hidan right now is the slowest member, and he outran you easily." Sasori watched in mild amusement, casually keeping it just out of the flailing blonde's reach. "So you need to practice, and the easiest way is to run. Obviously. Just *what* Iwagakure is teaching its shinobi these days..."

"Hey! Iwa is full of very capable teachers, yeah!" He retorted loyally. He rolled over again, blowing a sweat-soaked lock of hair out of his mouth and making a grab for the bottle. The Iwa-nin just barely missed it, though he caught Sasori's wrist instead. After a few minutes of wrestling and whining, Deidara was greedily pouring the water into his open mouth while an irked redhead looked away.

"If you drink that too fast you know you'll just throw it back up..." The puppeteer muttered spitefully, crossing his arms.

Deidara didn't hear him; he was busy wondering how he could still stand to be in a full-length black cloak in this heat, and hadn't even broken a sweat yet. "Hmm... Danna, I know you're a

Suna-nin and all, but *how* is it that you aren't sweating like a pig?" He asked bluntly.

Sasori gave him a flat look. "Suna-nin know how to live in the heat, unlike some other villages I could name." The explosives expert just squirted water at him. "And I'll repeat it, since you seem to either be masochistic or incredibly dense: you're going to throw up if you keep drinking water that quickly."

"Suna-nin or not, I come from Iwagakure. We know how to value water there, too, you know, yeah..." He snorted, taking another swig.

Unfortunately, as a shinobi that grew up in the desert, Sasori had a point. Five minutes later Deidara was leaning over the face of the mountain, retching, the redhead at least holding his hair back for him.

-.-.-

Hinata was missing Deidara. She hadn't seen him since he started his training, but from what she'd heard, Sasori was running him ragged. The kunoichi could only hope that it would pay off in the end. Without Deidara there with her during the day, however, she was constantly skittish and awkward around the other members. She miraculously seemed to get along well enough with Kisame, or at least they were civil toward each other. Itachi still scared the living daylights out of her, and Hidan had gotten it into his head that without her blonde partner to protect her, she was fair game.

What was worse was that what the Uchiha had said to her was still nagging at her. She most certainly did not want to drag Deidara down, but aside from finally getting back to practicing her *Kaiten* and a few of the basic moves of the *Juuken*, she couldn't really help herself all that much. (But the flip side was that she could finally perform a fairly decent *Kaiten* with minimal effort.) She would eventually have to give in and ask one of the members to help her, and hope to the gods that they wouldn't kill her instead.

What Hinata was really hoping for was to find that blue-haired kunoichi again, and ask her. Or at least get to know her a bit. Another female around had the younger girl somewhat excited, but try as she might, the Hyuuga hadn't seen hide nor hair of the female Akatsuki member since that day. She hadn't worked up the courage to ask anyone else, either.

Without Deidara, Hinata was hopelessly lost, and she knew that.

But she had vowed not to give up; she'd make herself stronger. (If all else failed she could always ask Hidan to train her and hope that he didn't make any more moves on her or try to convert her to his religion.) Any self-respecting Hyuuga would be disappointed to know that they were forced to deviate from their traditional tactics, but there weren't any other Hyuuga clan members around, so Hinata couldn't ask them for help. She'd have to deviate and possibly learn some other jutsus.

The navy-haired girl was in the kitchen, sitting at the table sipping her tea. She had 'borrowed' Deidara's blanket again, a habit she had embarrassedly formed during the month without him. But she had always replaced it before he came back in the evening. Adjusting it around her shoulders, the kunoichi idly looked at her chipped nail polish; she'd have to repaint them sometime soon. (The blonde had decided that they would both paint their nails the required purple, if only to annoy the other members.)

She was so deep in thought that she didn't notice Itachi until he sat beside her. Hinata jumped, nearly spilling her tea. He just set a plate of dango down in front of himself, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. She'd never pegged him as having a sweet tooth... mostly because Sasuke hated anything sweet with a burning passion.

Things began to get awkward very quickly. The white-eyed Konoha-nin hastily looked away, pretending to stare into the bottom of her nearly-empty mug. She could still feel those thankfully-black eyes boring a hole in the back of her skull, though.

If he wants to say something to me, he should just say it... what does he want from me? she thought nervously, pulling the blanket around her tighter. It had almost become her makeshift jacket; she couldn't find her old coat anywhere, and had been mourning its loss.

The incredibly awkward silence stretched on. Itachi seemed hell bent on not saying anything, even though she could still feel his eyes on her. Hinata determinedly kept her eyes anywhere but near him, even going as far as to notice that he was done with his food already. *So why is he still here...?*

Finally, she could take it no longer. She wasn't made for long stretches of silence like *this*! "U-Um... Itachi-san... d-do you need something...?"

"You failed to follow the advice I gave you." Itachi stated emotionlessly. That was part of what creeped her out about him; he seemed to have no feelings or emotions whatsoever. His voice and tone were always flat, lifeless. He had taken the 'shinobi must kill all emotions' lesson to heart.

She looked away again immediately, guilty. "I've been trying...!" She defended herself half-heartedly. Hinata hadn't exactly *asked* anyone to help her, per se, but some small part of her had almost been hoping to catch up to that blue-haired kunoichi and ask her...

"You haven't asked a single member or other ninja to train you. You've wasted a month already." He pointed out needlessly, which only further increased her guilt. She was far enough behind Deidara, she knew, but there was no need to rub it in! "You don't have the courage to ask anyone, do you? ...Foolish."

Yet again, his words hit home. She was rapidly approaching flustered, and she had no idea why he was even reprimanding her. Surely *he* didn't care if she fell behind in skill and got killed or injured in a mission. "I-I've just been waiting... for a better time..." She mumbled, standing up to take care of her empty mug. Politely, she took his plate as well, and practically fled from the scene to wash the dishes.

Unfortunately, he followed her. Itachi stood directly behind her, watching her intently. (And he didn't even *loom*, really. He was only about as tall as her, but somehow that only made him more intimidating.) The Uchiha waited until she was done, and Hinata had no choice—if only for the sake of common courtesy, though everyone else seemed to ignore that—to turn and face him. "You were the student of Yuuhi Kurenai, were you not?" Itachi asked flatly.

She nodded, dropping her gaze to her toes. They just barely peeked out from underneath the blanket, and she wiggled them a little bit. Anything to avoid looking into those dead eyes of his. "I w-was... Deidara killed K-Kurenai-sensei..." It seemed like years and years ago. The pain of her teacher's loss was dulled, at any rate, and for that she was thankful.

"Kurenai was a rather adept genjutsu user. I fought her once. Wouldn't she have passed any of her jutsus onto you?" He asked slowly, pausing between phrases as if choosing the perfect wording. She was surprised to hear that her sensei had fought the missing-nin, though didn't say anything

about that. She had a feeling that he was trying to make a point, but what that might be she had no idea.

"A-A few." The Hyuuga admitted. Mostly, it was just basics, though they had just started getting into some of the more complicated jutsus before... all of this happened. Mostly it was concealing and emotion-based genjutsu, as Hinata had shown early on, as a Hyuuga, she had excellent chakra control and a hand for illusions. (In all honesty, she was nearly perfect at one of the harder concealment jutsus, one that made the user completely unnoticeable and almost invisible.)

"...Your bloodline limit... isn't that for *detecting* genjutsu, not utilizing it?" Itachi asked, and for the smallest moment Hinata had thought she heard a bit of amusement in his voice, or possibly a smirk on his face. The irony was not lost on her, but Hinata also knew that she had to be balanced to be a successful kunoichi. Sure, she mainly focused on taijutsu, but she had some basic knowledge of the other areas.

"And your bloodline limit, the Sharingan, isn't that for utilizing genjutsu? B-But you still see through it..." She muttered, glancing up rebelliously into his eyes. She didn't like him poking fun at her Byakugan or clan, and definitely not her genjutsu skills. They were all she really had left to remind herself of her teacher.

Itachi looked surprised at her retort, though her sudden courage probably surprised them both. In fact, looking back on the fact that she had just *talked back* to an *Akatsuki member*, the rest of whatever courage she had failed her. Hinata looked meekly down at her bare feet again, hoping against hope that she wouldn't be killed or put through the *Tsukuyomi* again. (In fact, she'd almost rather be killed than put through that again. The nightmares still hadn't died down.)

Instead, his next move surprised her, even to the point of scaring her a bit. Uchiha Itachi put his hand on her head, almost *patting* her, and stated, "One must sometime go against tradition and the norm to become strong. I'm glad that even a foolish little kunoichi could recognize that fact, considering the circumstances. I will teach you genjutsu, Hyuuga Hinata."

Then, with a swirl of his black cloak, he disappeared, leaving the shocked heiress standing there in the kitchen, trembling in her blanket.

--.-

There was one good thing about being sick. It meant less training.

Deidara was still worn out, though. He was convinced he had some sort of heat-related illness, though Sasori just told him that he had a slight fever and just to go rest. "Have your little kunoichi pet take care of you." The redhead had told him.

Instead, the blonde just dragged himself to the kitchen. He was desperately hungry and thirsty, and though it probably wouldn't be good for his stomach, he had been living too long on too little. He wanted food, damn it. And something cold and preferably alcoholic to drink. (It wasn't often that he drank, but he just told himself that Sasori pushed him to do so.)

Deidara was halfway done fixing his ramen before it finally dawned on him that the black-clad figure at the table was not, in fact, wearing a uniform like he'd first thought. Doing a double-take, he realized that it was the Hyuuga girl, sitting at the table with her head resting on her arms, the

blanket from her bed wrapped around her. "Bya-chan?!" She jumped, startled, and looked around wildly until her white eyes finally found him.

"D-Deidara-kun? What are you doing here? Are you done with Sasori already?" She asked hastily.

He just walked over and instead of a reply, gave her the biggest hug he could manage, especially considering that his body was running on nothing but adrenaline right then.

Soon enough, the pair got to talking, and it slowly dawned on Deidara just how much he missed her company—and how much she had missed his. The Iwa-nin complained about his 'danna's methods and attitude toward him, though his new nickname for Sasori had her giggling. He told her that he hoped that he'd get a hell of a lot stronger for all of this effort, because he wasn't entirely sure he could spend this much energy before dying without telling himself that it was worth something.

His ramen was cold and untouched by the time he was done venting, and then casually asked, "So, what have you been doing in here, yeah? Must be pretty quiet without me, haha." Deidara poked at the cold broth, debating on whether or not to attempt to heat it back up or just eat it like this.

"I've finally gotten someone t-to train me..." She mumbled, pushing her forefingers together.

He choked on his lukewarm noodles. "Wh-What?! Why're *you* training, yeah?" He asked incredulously, deciding that he'd rather not try the soup a second time and got up to dump it out.

"I-I don't want to fall be-behind too badly..." She replied, avoiding his gaze. The kunoichi seemed to be getting very nervous all of a sudden, and pulled a bit at the blanket's corner.

"Huh? Why'd you fall behind, yeah? Bya-chan... you're confusing me." He said seriously, sitting back down and trying to look her in the eye. It was a feat easier said than done. When the shy girl wanted to not look at someone, it was almost impossible to make her do otherwise.

"Fo-For the m-mission... I want to-to do something better th-this time..." She said faintly, beginning to turn a light shade of pink under his gaze.

The Iwa-nin blinked in surprise. "What makes you think you're coming along again, yeah? I'm not putting you in that kind of danger."

She finally looked up at him, indignant. "What...?! N-No, I'm going with you, even if L-Leader-sama said I couldn't. I'm not letting you go alone, or even w-with Sasori." He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off, adding, "We're partners... remember?"

That shut him up on that subject. Deidara guiltily looked down at the mouths on his hands, deciding to approach that subject later on. "So... who'd you get to train you, yeah...? Kabuto?"

The dark-haired Konoha-nin gave him an odd look. "Why would I ask Kabuto-kun to train me?"

"I'd always thought that you wanted to be a medic-nin. You seem like you'd make a good sort of healer, yeah." The blonde shrugged, trying to dismiss it as nothing. Honestly, he was relieved that the traitorous spy wasn't training her with anything; she may have forgave him, but he still didn't trust him as far as he could throw him.

"No... I'm not really g-good at medical jutsu. I just know the basics, really..." She replied modestly, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. They lapsed into a short silence, until she finally looked up, smiling brightly. Deidara raised an eyebrow; what brought about that change? "Oh, Deidara-kun, guess what...?"

"What, yeah?"

"There's a female member of Akatsuki!" She exclaimed cheerfully.

It took a moment to sink in, but when it did, Deidara jumped to his feet. "*What? Where? Who?* When'd you meet her, yeah?!"

She looked a bit crestfallen at his reaction, but replied, "I-I don't know who she is... I just saw her once in the halls. She has pretty blue hair, and a big, white flower in her hair... I was sort of hoping you'd know who she was..."

Seeing her dejected, he quickly sat back down beside her, draping an arm over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Bya-chan! I'll just ask Sasori-danna about her, yeah. He seems to be knowledgeable about such things..." But then, a sudden thought struck him. If the female member wasn't teaching her, who was? "So then who's your teacher, yeah...?"

"Umm..." She bit her lip, pulling the blanket tighter around her. That instantly made him suspicious; who was it that she didn't want him to know?

"...Well?" He prompted, narrowing his visible eye.

"D-Deidara-kun, if you're s-sick, you really shouldn't be straining yourself!" She exclaimed suddenly, blushing and flustered. He stood up as well, crossing his arms. Sick or not, she was hiding something from him and wasn't doing it very well.

"I'm not the one with the blanket wrapped around me. Are *you* getting sick, yeah?" If anything, it made her blush even harder. Which was odd, unless there was something up with that blanket as well...

"Go-Go to bed, Dei-Deidara-kun! Y-You're sick!" She repeated, pointing in the direction of their rooms. "You sh-should be resting...!"

"Tell me, yeah!" He grinned, letting her know that he'd do anything necessary to get the information out of her. She was turning so red, she almost matched the scarlet rim of the blanket. *Something* was up. "Do you have a crush, yeah?"

"*N-No!*" Even though it only made her blush harder, if it was even physically possible, the way she said it dismissed the doubt from his mind. Most of it, at least. "I-It's just—I-It's just a blanket!" But obviously it was a blanket with a secret.

Eventually the confrontation degraded into him torturing her with tickles for the information, though she was holding up well. Gasping for breath and giggling hysterically, finally she told him that the blanket was just because she missed him, and it was a comfort thing. Deidara didn't let up, though; he wanted to know who had taken on his princess, too. But she was less than forthcoming with *that* information.

She tried to make a run for it, and made it halfway down the hall before he tackled her. Well, he'd been meaning to catch her, but somehow they both ended up on the ground, laughing and trying to untangle themselves from the blanket. Soon enough, however, Deidara gave it up as a bad job and set about to tickling her again, demanding the name of her mysterious new teacher. (That and some other stuff he'd always wanted to know; her birthday, her favorite color, and the question he'd been dying to ask since he'd learned about her Byakugan: whether or not she could see through clothes. Though he decided *not* to ask her what her bra size was.)

"U-Uncle! Uncle!" She squealed, finally, gasping for air. The Iwa-nin decided to let her have her

break, though he wouldn't give up on at least some of his questions.

"I'll stop if you tell me what's with that blanket, yeah!" He teased, kicking the offending fabric off of its foot where it had a stranglehold.

"It's—yours," She said after a momentary pause, blushing again. The blonde gave her a blank look, 'why' written across his face. "I, um, I missed your company a-and I was sitting on your bed and I decided I'd take it... sorry? I-I always replaced it before you got back in the evenings!" She added hastily, turning even redder.

"...Oh. So *that's* why it's smelled so nice, yeah." For good measure he brought a fistful of the blanket up to his face, inhaling deeply. She just smiled at him, albeit a bit uncertainly.

The pair eventually fought their way to their feet, detangling themselves from each other and the bedspread. The dark-haired girl held it out at arm's length for him, but he just shrugged. "You can have it if you miss my charming personality that much, Bya-chan. I'll just take your blanket."

"Okay..." They both meandered down the corridor toward her room, evidently to swap them out. Deidara was secretly pleased with himself; not only had he managed on getting what was practically a free day, but now both of them could *finally* spend some well-deserved quality time together. And eat. Definitely eat. The blue-eyed blonde held his stomach as it gave a pathetic growl, reprimanding him for throwing out his ramen earlier.

She dumped his blanket on her bed, and gathered up her own before offering it timidly to him. It was at that moment that the newest member of the organization got a deliciously evil idea.

"Hey... Bya-chan... wanna play musical blankets?"

"Huh?"

"Musical blankets, yeah. Like musical chairs... only with blankets and we don't tell anyone. Let's go swap out other members' blankets and see if they notice!"

The sense of smell for shinobi was a peculiar thing. Scents could mess with a ninja's head, whether they were conscious or not. Most of them had an above-average sense of smell, but that only worked against them in the long run. Sight and hearing can be fooled (quite easily), but smell was almost impossible to trick. That's why most shinobi learned to trust their noses over their eyes and ears. Every person had their own unique smell, and doing such a thing as swapping blankets that were covered in one person's smell and letting another person sleep with it... well, frankly Deidara had no idea what it would do. But it would no doubt be amusing.

Soon enough, the devious pair were hauling blankets back to the 'headquarters'—her room—to throw in the large pile that was growing. They'd decided to completely randomly swap them all out. After all, half the fun would be guessing who ended up with whose blanket the next day based on their behavior.

Deidara was tiptoeing down the hall, currently carrying Hidan and Kakuzu's bedspreads. The Hyuuga was following him, also tiptoeing, his own blanket still in her arms. They had already stolen Sasori, Kisame, Itachi and what they suspected to be Zetsu's, and after this pair, they were shooting in the dark for the remaining members' bedrooms.

The duo turned a corner, until a voice said, "What are you guys up to?"

Both of them froze, trying their hardest to look not guilty but damning themselves by even attempting to. Slowly, Deidara turned around and tried to look over the blankets in his arms. Beside

him, the kunoichi shrunk back behind him instinctively.

Luckily, a bright orange mask with a single eyehole met them. "...Tobi." Deidara deadpanned, and she relaxed.

"What are you guys doing?" The masked-nin repeated, rocking back on his heels. It was impossible to tell with the hidden face, but his voice sounded cheerful and friendly, at least.

The blonde regarded him suspiciously, wondering whether or not to let the rather naïve ninja in on their prank. Unfortunately, the dark-haired Hyuuga told him, "We're playing musical blankets. Would you like to help us, Tobi-san?" Deidara groaned mentally. Tobi annoyed him, pure and simple, but the idiot could help them in this case...

"Musical blankets?" He asked blankly, cocking his head to the side. "...Okay!"

Tobi miraculously showed them his own room, but after going down no less than twenty different hallways, following him, Deidara realized that they were lost and he had *no idea* where the last two members' rooms were. "Tobi! Don't you know where we are, yeah?!"

"I thought we were going back to Hinata-san's room to get the blankets and pass them out?" The black-haired shinobi asked, and the kunoichi beside him nodded in confusion.

"We should probably do that, Deidara-kun... I don't think we'll find the leader's room." She said softly, and he reluctantly agreed.

"So, Hinata-san, whose blanket do you want?" Tobi asked her cheerfully, his voice grating on the artist's nerves. Something about that guy just... *bugged* him.

She giggled politely, shrugging. "I... I don't know. I guess we'll all just find out, or we can guess in the morning, right?" But she pulled Deidara's blanket around her shoulders a bit tighter.

That night, Deidara could hardly sit still. He couldn't *wait* for someone to notice (because no doubt they would) and start a fight, preferably against one of the other members. Tobi had agreed to keep quiet about the prank—but it wasn't like Hinata had thought he'd tell or anything. The masked ninja was much too sweet to get them in trouble purposely.

She had gotten away with keeping Deidara's blanket, though neither of the guys knew it. After spending a month wrapped up in it, the heiress could tell his apart from the others, and stealthily stole it from out of the pile for her own. As for everyone else... she had no idea who was going to end up with who.

The trio were sitting in her room, chatting good-naturedly. Hinata had decided that she liked Tobi well enough; he was polite, and rather friendly. A bit oblivious about some things, but it only added to his sweet charm. He was cute, like a little puppy or something. Deidara didn't seem to like him, however, so she kept herself from getting to be *too* friendly with him.

"So, whose blanket do you think I ended up with, Hinata-san?" He asked, crossing his legs and leaning against her bed.

"I don't know, Tobi-san. You'll just have to guess along with us."

"I bet Hidan's would reek of blood, yeah." Deidara snickered, stifling his laugh with his hand. "Someone would *definitely* notice that one."

"Yup. But Hidan-san and Kakuzu-san are both out on a mission, so they probably won't be back for awhile." Tobi informed them, holding up his hand matter-of-factly. "They won't be able to play the game!"

The blonde grimaced; without Hidan here as a cover, it could get... interesting. "Hmm. I wonder if Kisame's blanket would smell like water... or fish... yeah..." He struck a thoughtful pose, looking for all the world like he was actually wondering about it.

That only made Hinata think, too. What *would* a lot of the others smell like...? No doubt Hidan would smell of blood, but what kind of scent would there be under that coppery smell? She brought her adopted blanket up to her nose, sniffing it. Deidara... smelled like clay and sweat, of course, but beneath that there was a more subtle smell. It was definitely earthy, but there was almost an undertone of what almost smelled like the rain. The heiress blinked; the dirt and the rain. The former she would've guessed, he being an Iwa-nin and all, but she wasn't expecting the sweet smell of the rain.

"I think we should have done all of the smelling *before* we passed the blankets back out if you were curious," Tobi stated matter-of-factly, nodding slightly. "Because now we really can't do that, can we?"

Deidara looked deviously at them both, but Hinata gave him a flat look that clearly replied '*no*'.

-.-.-

The next morning was chaos. But it wasn't entirely due to their game; Hidan and Kakuzu had come back late the night before, and had decided to have their usual shouting match before the sun was even up. Hinata peeked cautiously and sleepily out of her doorway, disheveled and clutching her new blanket. Several other bed heads were looking around grumpily for the source of all of the noise.

"If you had just *killed* that guy like I said to—" Kakuzu snarled, chasing a cackling Hidan down the hall. Several doors slammed shut as they ran past, hoping to deflect shrapnel and jutsus.

The Hyuuga's signature white eyes widened when she realized that neither of them had their cloaks on (the Jashinist didn't even have a shirt), and that Hidan was positively *covered* in blood. His pale hair was stained red, and there were several open wounds decorating what she could see of his body. Still, it didn't appear to be a detriment to his running ability, or his ability to dodge his partner's attacks quite easily.

"Yeah right! That little fucker was *asking* to be sacrificed, with his strutting and sins!" The blood-soaked man shouted, looking left and right for a convenient open doorway for him to hide in.

Hinata closed her door a few inches, peeking out with a single eye. She definitely did *not* want to get in the middle of that. Kakuzu had just gotten hold of his partner and was proceeding to stab him with his own rib. What was just as shocking, perhaps, was Kakuzu's own body; it was a patchwork mess of stitches, scars and threads. He looked to be more of a mess than Hidan; what had *happened*

to him on that mission?

"You didn't have to *disobey* direct orders to perform a half-hour ritual and give the enemy enough time to form a goddamn army! I don't care about your fucking religion—*the mission comes first, you little asshole!*" He snarled, each of his last words punctuated with another strike with the rib.

It was getting very bloody, very quickly. Blood was starting to splatter onto the walls, and quite the pool of it was forming below the bickering pair. Hidan was screaming bloody murder, repeatedly trying to claw Kakuzu's eyes out (but his partner's arms were longer, thus he couldn't reach). After a few moments of that, though (and a few other members watching like it was some sort of game), Hidan finally shouted, "*Shit*, man! That fucking hurt! Do you know how *long* it take to heal a fucking heart? You bitch—oh no you didn't! Oh no you goddamn didn't! Let go!"

Kakuzu snickered, attempting to pull Hidan's heart out of his open chest. He was sawing away madly at the remaining blood vessels and arteries connecting it to with the rib. The silver-haired masochist was yelling even more loudly, if such a thing was possible. *Everyone* had to be awake now.

Hinata slowly closed her room's door, not wishing to see anymore of the gruesome scene. It was unlikely that Hidan would actually be killed, but evidently he had enough blood to create a small flood out in the hallway. Not a nice thing to wake up to. She activated her Byakugan, checking to see if anyone else was near enough to be watching, or if anyone would decide to actually break it up.

Miraculously, two chakra signatures were slowly making their way down the hall towards the blood bath, seeming to want to do the latter. One of them was larger and had a massive chakra reserve, while the other was shorter in stature with chakra-filled eyes. Kisame and Itachi.

Deidara seemed to be in his room, standing by the door and presumably watching as well. Sasori was no where in her limited range of vision, and neither was anyone else. Saving herself a bit of chakra, she shut off her bloodline limit again.

"Kakuzu, *stop* it." She heard Itachi's voice through the door, and she decided that it was probably safe enough to peek out once more. Sure enough, the pair were standing down the hall, trying not to get their bare feet wet with blood. The Uchiha looked annoyed, or as annoyed as such an emotionless man could look. Kisame, on the other hand, looked ready to join in the fight and rip both their throat's out. Itachi delicately covered his nose with his hand, obviously repulsed by the strong smell of the blood. Unconsciously Hinata did the same, just now really noticing the stench. "As if I hadn't smelled enough blood last night. I think Kisho caught something and had the civility to drop it on my bed."

"Well I ain't some rat!" Hidan squawked, trying to pull his heart out by the strings. Kakuzu wouldn't let it out of his iron grasp, and instead glared at the peacemakers.

"This is none of *your* damn business. If you'd have seen how Hidan acted in that mission you would be joining me in maiming the fool."

Deidara sidled up to the scene at that point, keeping close to the wall and trying his best to look innocent and guilt-free. Hinata noticed this and hastily opened her door wider to allow him into the sanctuary. Once inside, he shut the door behind him and started laughing silently.

"Deidara-kun, this is hardly a laughing matter! They might start a fight out there... A real one." She reprimanded him, glancing back nervously to make sure that no one else was in the room. With large groups of shinobi, it never hurt to check twice.

"N-No, not that... Itachi said that his bed smelled like blood, right? He probably got Hidan's blanket, yeah!" The blonde stifled his laughing with her pillow, doubling over with his laughter. "We're gonna see the results of that prank now, yeah...!"

That got her laughing as well, though she tried to remain more composed and ended up giggling into the blanket. After the laughing fits were more or less over, both ninja eagerly peeked back out into the hallway, looking for any interesting developments. Apparently Zetsu had woken up, though Tobi and Sasori were no where to be seen. The schizophrenic shinobi didn't look happy—even his white side. He was having a three-way shouting match with Kakuzu and Kisame, though Hidan was only silent because of his partner's hand covering his mouth, and Itachi looked ready to join in at any moment.

"—*not my fault if you leave your things around for Tobi to find them!*" Zetsu's black half snarled, narrowing his yellow eye.

"I didn't do any such fucking thing!" Kakuzu replied hotly, throwing Hidan's heart at him.

He sidestepped, instead catching it in his hand. "*If you don't want me eating this, don't throw such trash! Now tell me what the hell you were doing with your shitty blanket in my room—*"

"*You?!* You aren't the only victim here, you schizo freak!" Kisame shouted, looking like he was sorely disappointed in the lack of his sword. (He must have left it in his room; everyone was still either in their mission clothes or pajamas.)

"You're all being idiotic!" Itachi broke in, fuming. The other three paused, if only to allow the Uchiha his moment. "*Think*. Obviously, someone decided to pull some sort of prank to annoy us all and swap out all of our blankets so we'd be short-fused and angry at each other. Zetsu, has Tobi—"

"*It wasn't Tobi.*" The plant-like ninja replied immediately, on the defensive once more. "Tobi is a good boy."

"Why the fuck would someone—"

"Everyone here knows the relationship between a shinobi's senses and his mind. Someone wanted to mess with us." Kisame grumbled, reluctantly agreeing with his partner. The blue-haired swordsman crossed his arms haughtily, not looking pleased at having to do so, though. He looked down at the bloody chaos in front of him, adding with a fanged smirk, "Looks like they succeeded pretty well."

Deidara backed away from the door, looking caught between running for it and laughing his head off. Hinata smiled uncertainly, hoping that it wouldn't come to anything physical. Looking back, it probably wasn't a smart thing to do, pulling a prank on the infamous Akatsuki. The blonde walked over toward the stone wall, feeling it, mumbling, "I wonder if I can get through this, yeah..."

"You *are* an Iwa-nin...?" She whispered, wondering if that'd help at all.

"*What* is going on out here." A new voice joined the fray, and the pair immediately peeked back out. The tone had made it clear that it wasn't a question; it was a demand. The leader, as shadowy as ever, had finally come to either mediate or punish. Obviously he wasn't a morning person, either; the silhouette's spiky hair looked even messier and his glare was vicious. But he didn't wait for any of them to elaborate. The leader sighed wearily, and looked down at the blood covering the floor. "Kakuzu, Hidan, clean this up. Itachi, Kisame, go back to bed or get to work. Zetsu, follow me—I have a mission for you and Tobi. I don't want this to happen ever again, am I clear? Just because the newbie of the organization managed to break into all of your rooms without setting off

any alarm jutsus and swapped out your goddamn *blankets* doesn't mean you all have to go on the warpath. Save that for the Jinchuuriki."

There was a small moment of silence as he walked away, Zetsu following him meekly. Deidara grinned uneasily, mouthing, "*Shit*." Slowly, four pairs of eyes belonging to four of the deadliest shinobi in the world turned toward Hinata's door. She slammed it shut, hoping that Sasori would come to their rescue and stop the coming onslaught; if only to save his own skin.

There was a knock on the door behind her. Itachi's voice, ever calm, came through the wood, "I think now would be a good time to start training, Hinata-san."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh-em-gee, yo! Deidara has to face the music, unless Sasori intervenes to save himself! (Unless the redhead wants to get back for that 'danna' crack.) Hinata is stuck with Itachi, evidently, and that will go over like a lead balloon.

One Mistake After Another

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The basic idea of the 'ignore me' jutsu was developed by DameWren (who is no longer on here, sadly), authoress of the famous NaruHina story Two Halves. She called it the 'gliding eyes no jutsu'; I just changed the name, but the basic idea of the jutsu is the same, and thus belongs rightly to her.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hinata found herself behind one of the place's many locked doors; it turned out to be just a large, empty room, dimly lit and with enough room to practice all sorts of jutsu. No doubt it was an indoor training arena, though why its door usually was locked was beyond her comprehension. The room was barely above a lighting level of pitch black, and she found her eyes adjusting abnormally fast to the darkness, as they always did. Not only did being a Hyuuga give her the Byakugan, but she also had unusually sharp eyesight and adjusted to sudden lighting changes faster than the average jounin. It was a handy perk to have, especially in such a low-rank ninja.

Itachi took a standing position by one of the torches, glancing at the flickering flame. Half of his face was bathed in the dark, only two scarlet eyes peering out at her. The Sharingan almost seemed to be glowing, and Hinata forced herself to look away. It wouldn't do to lose control now; she had a feeling that the Uchiha would love a reason to kill or violently subdue her.

"Let me see all of the genjutsu you have knowledge of." He stated coldly, resting his arm on the button of his cloak. She had begun to recognize that posture as his 'relaxed' stance. Not that he couldn't kill her a dozen different ways in less than a second, even from a completely casual pose.

Of course, performing all of the genjutsu she knew was easier said than done. She hadn't been practicing, and the last *real* genjutsu she performed was before she had been kidnapped—over two months ago. And it wasn't like she was an expert, anyway. His standards were perfection, and the heiress knew she would fail abysmally. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she thought, for the briefest moment, that he looked just like her father...

"A-Any one you'd like to s-see first...?" Awkwardly, Hinata also realized that she had no idea what to address him as. Deidara was being facetious when he called Sasori 'danna'; what on earth would she call someone in the illustrious Akatsuki that she actually wanted to show *respect* to?

"I do not care." Itachi remained impassive, staring at her with those disturbing crimson eyes. She repressed a shudder, staring instead at his feet. How she'd gotten into such a mess... taught by a known mass murderer, the man who had nearly killed her and traumatized her for life, the reason that she hadn't gotten a true restful night for over a month... And now she had to try to live up to his impossible standards. And possibly even *learn* something from him!

A Hyuuga learning genjutsu from an Uchiha... Father would not be pleased to hear of that, she thought, not without some minor satisfaction. Their clans hated each other. It was common knowledge, and also the butt of several inside jokes from inside the village. Their ancestors would very likely die of a heart attack to see this scene. (Or, at least, her Hyuuga ancestors. The Uchiha ones would most likely gloat.)

Forming a rat sign, then hare, then dragon, then another rat and a horse, the kunoichi called out, "*Houtteoko Onore no jutsu!*" She had decided to start out with her best jutsu; the 'ignore me' technique. She had pretty much mastered it, and the kunoichi knew that if used properly, this genjutsu with her bloodline limit could be a deadly combination.

The genjutsu was a complicated one to perform, requiring decent chakra control and a very specific mindset while holding the illusion. Luckily, as a Hyuuga, Hinata had excellent control over her chakra, and as the reluctant heiress of the Hyuuga, had the mindset drilled into her since birth. She was required to continue thinking '*don't look at me, ignore me please*' (or something to that effect) while forming the seals, and immediately afterward. Needless to say, it made the genjutsu quite easy for her. The jutsu itself was a concealment technique; it made the user not invisible, but completely unseen nonetheless by everyone around him or her. Anyone's eyes just glided over her, entirely (and unwillingly) ignoring her. The genjutsu was easy to break, in theory; if one was looking specifically *for* the user, then they would usually see them. In a fight it would be nearly useless, but Hinata's strength wasn't in her fighting ability; it was in her reconnaissance skills.

She stepped backward and to the left silently, watching Itachi's eyes with her Byakugan. He searched the room for a brief moment, and that one second was all she needed to know; her genjutsu had beaten the infamous Sharingan, if even for that moment. (It made the victory even more sweet was that he knew exactly what jutsu it was, and had to have been looking for her.) But then his eyes alighted on her, and followed her invisible movements. Hinata took a few more steps to either side, watching him watch her.

"...You are rather proficient at that particular jutsu." He said, trying hard (and nearly succeeding) not to sound impressed. She dispelled the illusion, beaming. The black-haired shinobi frowned slightly, and she guiltily pressed her index fingers together, wishing she could use the jutsu again to hide.

Unfortunately, as the day wore on and as her jutsu collection diminished, her skills in genjutsu only decreased. The kunoichi had used her best one first, leaving only mediocre techniques left, and Itachi knew this. He didn't comment any further than that one factual sentence that might've suggested he'd been impressed, just silently watching her with his Sharingan. Twice she messed up because she was too busy trying to ignore his eyes, much to her mortification.

The student of Yuuhi Kurenai was running out of genjutsu. She had used all of her concealment techniques first, as it was those she was best at, and now she was running into combat genjutsu. Was she actually supposed to try to use chuunin-level genjutsu on an Uchiha? "U-Um... all of the genjutsu I know... er, that I haven't sh-showed you... is combative...?" Hinata stammered nervously, hoping against hope that he would say that she didn't have to perform it.

"Even if it will have no effect on me," Itachi deadpanned, "I expect to you try. I need to see at what skill level you are on with *all* of your genjutsu." That was that answer she'd been hoping to avoid.

The Hyuuga nodded, sighing and hanging her head. She may as well use the basic emotional ones first, then. Forming the needed seals, she muttered, "*Kaihou Omoi: Ojike no jutsu!*"

The *Kaihou Omoi* collection of genjutsu was the basics for any real genjutsu user. They upset the balance of chemicals in the brain's frontal lobe; where the emotions are regulated. They would give the victim an overdose of a certain chemical, instantly getting the chosen emotional reaction. Hinata only knew four of them, though how many total there were she had no idea.

"Even though you have barely managed to successfully utilize that jutsu, I will concede that it is always good to know the basics." Itachi noted. Predictably the jutsu had no effect on him.

Of course he'd been able to instill fear but not feel it, she thought sullenly. The ex-Konoha chuunin knew the fear, courage, depression and anger techniques, and had just used the fear. Next, she planned on trying the courage one—created to give the victim a boost of confidence that would theoretically lead to his or her downfall in battle—to see if it would have any visible effect. Maybe she'd get lucky. "*Kaihou Omoi: Yuuki no jutsu!*"

The black-haired Akatsuki member showed no signs of any changes. Hinata knew it wouldn't work on him unless he *let* it work, but at this point, she didn't even know if she was performing the jutsus correctly. It had been months since she even *thought* about the *Kaihou Omoi*...

After a short, but awkward, silence, she decided to just continue. Obviously her new mentor wasn't going to comment. "...*Kaihou Omoi: Utsubyou no jutsu...*!" Itachi didn't react in the least. Frankly, it felt like someone had cast the depression jutsu on her; she just kept sinking lower and lower in his eyes...

The anger-boosting genjutsu did nothing, either, even though she knew it wouldn't. It would've been nice to get some sort of reaction, even if it was just a comment, however, to see if she was performing it right. The kunoichi kept her head low, hiding from his gaze with her long hair. She felt like sinking into the ground, or at the very least running back to Deidara. Even Tobi—or dare she say it, *Sasori*—would be a welcome reprieve from the stoic coldness of Itachi.

"...Is that all?" He asked after a moment, stirring her from her thoughts. She nodded, keeping her eyes on his feet. Again, he didn't say anything for the longest time, which only added to her depressive thoughts. "How long had Kurenai been teaching you genjutsu?"

"About... four months. Sh-She'd only started teaching me the b-basics." Hinata didn't bother adding that the reason it'd taken so long for her to learn those jutsus was because they had a three-week-long mission in between that, cutting off their training time. It would sound like she was defending herself, making excuses. And she did not like doing that. She wearily sat down, crossing her legs on the cold stone floor. Her chakra was about halfway depleted, and that was only because of her control and minimal energy poured into the illusions. The strain was starting to show.

A few minutes passed, each of them lost in their thoughts. Then, though, Itachi further surprised her by saying, "Your grasp on what she taught you is adequate. Subtracting missions and downtime, it means that you would have roughly learned all of that in two to two and a half months. It is an appalling learning time for anyone in the Akatsuki or affiliated to the group in any way. Granted, you are only a chuunin, and a new one at that. Thus, I will concede that you having learned all of those jutsus in that time period is quite the feat, and you show potential in the area of genjutsu."

For a moment, all Hinata could do was stare up at him from her seat on the floor. *Did he... did Itachi just... compliment me?*

But before the confused—and slightly disturbed—kunoichi could puzzle it out, he motioned for her to stand back up. "Get up. You have passed the first test; your training begins now. The first thing you will learn is how to dispel genjutsu."

-.-.-

Deidara had never been so glad to see Sasori in his life. In fact, he'd never been glad, period, to see

the guy before. But his savior and protection came in the form of the redheaded angel. The blonde eagerly hid behind him, away from the bloodthirsty, vengeful Kisame, Kakuzu and Hidan. (Though admittedly, half of that bloodlust from the masochist was directed towards his partner.)

"What is going on here...?" Sasori asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes. His hair was a mess, sticking up in random spikes and hanging into his eyes. How the argument hadn't woken him up earlier was nothing short of a miracle; for the past hour and a half, Deidara had been running from the furious trio, calling for his 'danna' to come save him. Eventually they'd made their way to Sasori's room, though the other three had done everything possible to stop him.

"That little pest of yours broke into our rooms and decided to mess with our minds," Kakuzu snarled, pointing at the offending Iwa-nin. In turn, the blonde whimpered and tried his best to look innocent when Sasori looked back at him for his reaction to the accusation.

"And...?" He deadpanned, his tone saying that he didn't see the point behind the attempted assault. "I don't see why you all have to act like you're five."

"You're one to talk about *ages*, Sasori." The self-proclaimed treasurer of the organization snapped, turning his anger on the much shorter shinobi. Deidara was half glad of this.

Sasori, on the other hand, bristled. "At least *I* act my age. You three could all afford to grow up a bit and act like some real shinobi." The blonde was just beginning to relax; another argument was starting to cover him and direct their attention away from him.

"Yeah fucking right!" Hidan scowled, wiping some of the blood off of his chin. Not that it did much good, of course. The silver-haired ninja was still saturated in the stuff. "You're a goddamn contradiction! You say 'grow the hell up' but look at you, paradin' around with your innocent angelic little act, fucking over the gods and mortality with your heathen body and—"

"Hypocrite! Look at *you*, you sacrilegious psycho! You're over two hundred years old and you have the body of a twenty-year-old!" Sasori was rapidly approaching furious, an uncharacteristic turn of events for him. His voice was starting to sharpen into a snarl, and it was starting to disturb Deidara (who was unfortunately the nearest thing available to the irate ninja). Evidently Hidan had struck—no, more like slashed to bits—a nerve, though what it may be the blonde was clueless to. Kisame, as well, was looking rather lost.

"Sacrilegious? *Sacrilegious*?!" Hidan cast about for his scythe, unfortunately forgetting that it was likely still in his room. Having found no available suitably sharp weapon, he instead licked the blood off of his lips and grinned savagely. "If Jashin-sama wants to *reward* me with this body it's up to him. But at least I know it's still fucking *human*! Let's find out if you can bleed, goddamn godless heathen!"

Deidara jumped back as quickly as he could, but unfortunately, Sasori was right: he was the slowest member of the group. Hidan lunged at the redhead, tackling him and sending both of them tumbling into the unfortunate Iwa-nin. (Kakuzu and Kisame stood back, watching with amusement.) It soon became a three-way tussle, though neither of the other two seemed to notice this.

Sasori had gotten some sort of katana-like blade out of nowhere, and was hacking away at every available inch he could reach. Hidan ignored the assault, instead grabbing the blade's edge with his bare hands and attempted to wrench it out of his grasp. Deidara shoved Sasori forward off of him, throwing the shorter one off balance and letting the immortal slip the weapon free of its owner's grasp. Now the tables were turned; the Jashinist began slashing eagerly away at the Suna-nin, though more than one of his strikes came a bit too close for the blonde's comfort.

The katana sliced into Deidara's arm as he held it up to defend himself. Luckily, it stopped at the bone, and reminded the bickering pair that there *was*, indeed, another shinobi in the fight. Sasori's eyes widened slightly and he scowled, reaching up to elbow Hidan in the jaw. He stumbled backward, taking the blade with him and freeing the blue-eyed shinobi's arm. But now Deidara was out for revenge; he wasn't just going to be a casualty!

"You ba—" He started, but Sasori turned and pushed him roughly against the wall, cutting him off. The redhead stood protectively between them, his back to Deidara. The blonde grimaced, hated being interrupted like that. *Wait—why is Sasori protecting me?!*

"What the fuckin' hell are you *doing*?" Hidan growled, holding the bloodied blade at the ready. "Are you protecting the brat?!"

"Yeah! What are you doing, Sasori-danna?! Let me out, yeah!" He added, but his partner just replied by taking a step backward and pinning him against the wall.

"Leader-sama has said that if this brat dies before his mission, it'll be on my head. You will not harm him." Without glancing backward, Sasori kept his gaze leveled with the silver-haired missing-nin. He seemed to have calmed down into his usual jaded attitude, though Deidara could feel that his body was tense. The Iwa-nin tried in vain to push him away.

"*Oh!* So you're his keeper until then?" Murder intent forgotten for the moment, Hidan leaned back, relaxed, and grinned. "Has Sasori got a little pet now? Well, even if *I* can't kill you—all I have to do is kill the faggot and you're fucking *toast*, immortal or not." He tossed the blade back towards the pair, narrowly avoiding hitting Deidara in the shoulder.

Kakuzu's bloodlust seemed to be sated with this new information as well. He appeared to be smirking underneath his mask, and said, "I'd suggest you keep a close eye on your pet from now on, Sasori. Because we know a quick and clean way to kill you."

"Neither of you are as hard to kill as you'd like to think." The Suna art-nin replied coolly. The other pair didn't say anything, but they bristled slightly. Kisame was also smirking to himself, obviously taking this valuable information to heart as well.

There was a long period of nothing but staring—or rather, glaring. The three so-proclaimed immortals watched each others' movements intently, watching for any signs of further hostile action. Deidara was getting nervous again; now *he* was the target again, and not even for his own actions this time! He'd really have to get stronger now...

Finally, after what had to have been nothing short of an eternity, the other three departed. Hidan and Kakuzu disappeared back in the direction of their rooms, whereas Kisame just smirked mysteriously and vanished with the aide of a *Shunshin*. Only after they were all gone did Sasori relax with a sigh. He turned around, taking a step backwards, looking up at Deidara from under his hair. The Iwa-nin glared placidly back down at him, not going to be the first to break the silence. It was obvious that neither of them knew what to say about the information that had been leaked during that scene.

"Deidara..." Sasori said after a pause, averting his muddy brown eyes, "Next time, *don't* wake me up like that."

The following days passed agonizingly slowly. Itachi was a ruthless teacher; he drilled the lessons into her head over and over, sometimes physically if needed. If Hinata had thought that her father was cruel...

She now knew how Deidara must have felt about his training, though no doubt his was much more straining than hers. Still, she was exhausted every day since then, both physically and mentally, when she crawled into her bed. It would be nearly impossible to see the chipper blonde from now on; the chances that they'd both be sick or free from training at the same time were too high.

The good thing was, was that she actually *was* learning. The Hyuuga had learned how to dispel genjutsu quite quickly and cleanly, without having to injure herself. Any genjutsu Itachi cast on her was still out of her league, but he informed her primly that she could probably dispel most jounin-level genjutsu with minimal difficulty now. Of course, it only meant that he was increasing the strength of his own illusions now. (He seemed to have *fun* casting genjutsu on her, commanding her to break the illusions. Thank everything holy that he hadn't used the *Tsukuyomi*.)

After the first few days, the Uchiha said that she shouldn't only be learning to repel and dispel genjutsu, but also how to cast it properly and prepare herself in case her victim broke through it. She'd worked on her handle of the *Kaihou Omoi* a bit more, and liked to think that she was progressing in that area.

One day, after a particularly horrifying genjutsu that replayed her own death repeatedly before her eyes, Hinata collapsed, trembling and hugging her knees to her chest. The Hyuuga knew she just wasn't ready for such illusions, even if they were fake. Itachi looked down at her, impassive as always. She looked timidly up at him, on the verge of tears. "...You are still affected by the psychological remnants of the *Tsukuyomi*, aren't you?" He asked quietly.

The question caught her off guard, but hastily she ducked her head and hid behind her hair. It was getting quite long, and made a better shield every day. "I-I have nightmares... but th-that's it..." She admitted. It wouldn't do to lie to him; she'd found that out the hard way, unfortunately.

"If you think about it, most shinobi in your place would be *thanking* me." He deadpanned. After a beat he slowly sat down beside her, sitting cross-legged.

She gave him an incredulous look. *How can he... is he really that arrogant? I hadn't thought he was that egotistical...! What does he mean by that?* She thought, wondering if this was some sort of puzzlement genjutsu he'd placed on her. (She also learned to be on guard for such things when around him.)

"How many shinobi do you know would actually *use* the information I gave you? I revealed some of your darkest fears and weaknesses. Instead of suffering through them and pitying yourself, why don't you take that information and use it to your advantage?" He asked in disdain. "If you know your fears, you can overcome them. Why don't you *try* it."

She had never thought about it that way before. Usually she tried *not* to think about the images, not see through to the underneath (like a good little shinobi should). The light having been shown to her, the heiress felt a bit ashamed of her weakness and thick-headedness, vowing to figure out a way to work the curse to her advantage. "Um... thank you?" She said uncertainly, biting her bottom lip. She never knew what to say to Itachi.

"You're dismissed for today." He replied, as if he hadn't heard her. She shakily got up, dusting off her pants, and stood for a moment beside him. Hinata felt like she should say something more, but

as to *what*, she couldn't think of a single thing. Instead she left the dimly lit room, leaving him sitting on the floor in his meditative position.

She had no idea what time it was, but her stomach told her that it was probably close to some meal. At any rate, it was demanding caloric sustenance, rather snappishly. She made her way cautiously toward the kitchen, hoping not to see anyone. Not even Deidara, really; the last time she'd seen him was when Itachi had first announced he was teaching her genjutsu. The dark-haired kunoichi knew how the Iwa-nin felt about the Uchiha. But it wasn't like she *chose* to be taught by him...

She had no idea how she'd handle the situation when they finally did see each other again. Almost luckily, it'd been all too easy to avoid him with both of their training schedules, but sooner or later, that'd run out. Four (and a half) months would be the absolute latest available date that she could postpone it to. Because no matter what Deidara said, she *was* going on that mission with him. She didn't like the idea of him attacking a Jinchuuriki—much less Gaara—with only a homicidal redhead and possibly a medic with questionable loyalties backing him up. Besides... they were a team.

Hinata hurriedly made herself some soup, alone in the kitchen. She kept her Byakugan active, just in case; she had a feeling that some of the other members would be less than friendly toward her after that prank. She fled from the scene afterward, carrying her steaming cup of ramen, holding a pair of chopsticks in her mouth. Her room was just down the hallway; she was home free. Switching off her Byakugan, the relieved Konoha-nin sighed and started humming, debating on whether or not to repaint her nails today.

As she turned the corner, however, a surprise was waiting for her by her door. A surprise sporting an Akatsuki cloak, crossed arms, and the unmistakable air of waiting for her. Hinata stopped dead, nearly spilling her ramen. Her white eyes grew large, slowly, taking up the sight before her.

The female member of the Akatsuki turned slowly to regard her, before saying softly, "So you're the Hyuuga girl."

The Hyuuga could only nod, dumbstruck. Since Itachi had taken her under his wing, so to speak, she'd nearly forgotten all about her underlying quest to meet the kunoichi of the organization. And here she was, perfectly composed and waiting for her by her room's door.

The blue-haired woman smiled faintly, the stud in her bottom lip catching the light. "Itachi-san told me that you have been wanting to meet me."

-.-.-

Deidara had tried to raise the subject of 'immortality' several times, but each time he was shot down mercilessly by Sasori. He'd tried subtler methods of questioning, but he was just-as-subtly blocked. The blonde tried every shinobi method known to man to try to get his numerous questions answered... and the Suna-nin managed to evade or field every single one. (Obviously he'd had a lot of experience in that department. Which only added fuel to Deidara's fire.)

"Hey, danna," (because he was *definitely* going to make sure that it got annoying) "How old are you, yeah?" He asked conversationally, just before his morning run. The running was getting steadily easier, though there was no way he'd even come close to the time limit Sasori imposed. He could barely get *five* laps done around the mountain in ten minutes, let alone ten. He stretched

languidly, both stalling and probing.

"Older than you." The puppet master replied curtly, his words at odds with his young face. "Now shut up and run."

"I'm *stretching*, yeah. So I don't get stiff and sore and muscle cramps. So you don't have to carry me back inside, yeah?" He pointed out smugly. Sasori didn't reply, so Deidara switched tactics. Each day he was asking different questions, though they were basically the same: *tell me what you are. Tell me who you are.* "What did you mean when you said that it wasn't that hard to kill an immortal, yeah?"

"Deidara, *shut up*. You don't need to know because it doesn't concern you. That was a threat aimed at Hidan, and Kakuzu if needed. You—and Kisame—didn't need to necessarily hear any of that conversation. But Kisame has the good sense not to keep pestering me about it." Sasori complained, visibly irate. Deidara snickered inwardly; annoyance warfare worked wonders.

"But danna, I'm curious, and if we're partners we have to know each other's *every secret*." He cooed, pulling off the innocent act all too well. The Iwa-nin bent over backward, stretching out one leg, then the other, staring at his supposed elder the whole while.

"I thought the Hyuuga was your partner?" Unfortunately, his appearance wasn't the only thing innocent that Sasori could pull off. Deidara scowled, standing back up.

"You keep insisting that we're partners, yeah." He mumbled, only temporarily defeated. "Hmm... Sasori-danna, how many of these 'immortals' are in the organization? Are you all really unable to be killed, or is that just a façade?" Best to be blunt.

Sasori stiffened, his back toward his taller partner. Slowly, he turned around, and his mouth was twisted in a rather evil-looking grin. Deidara blinked, wondering if he was going to pay for his questioning. "Deidara... *you are being annoying*. If you *so* desire to know, I'll tell you if you tell me what happened in Iwagakure that made you *so* afraid of ANBU, huh?"

Deidara grimaced. He wasn't ready to share any of *that* information with anyone; it showed him in a less than flattering light. Still... a bluff could work. No doubt Sasori was expecting him to back down, so the blonde artist decided not to let him have that satisfaction. "Okay, yeah."

The brown-eyed shinobi looked suspicious of the agreement. "... " But then, what was even more disconcerting was that he relaxed, and let himself slip into a serene smile. The angelic ruse was back and in full effect. "Alright, Deidara. I will tell you *everything* about the immortals of the Akatsuki, you'll tell me all of your idiotic little fears, and you will go tell your precious little 'Bya-chan' and then everyone *else* will find out. The organization will collapse into anarchy and it will all be because of one little naïve blonde's curiosity."

"I'm not as stupid as you think I am, Sasori-danna, yeah." Deidara said simply, and leapt up into the nearest tree to begin his usual ten laps.

Only after he was out of sight of the redhead did he finally relax again. Or rather, he sighed and pondered what Sasori had revealed. *Is the information that valuable...? I doubt it. I think danna's just overreacting, as per usual, I bet. But... I wonder what being immortal has to do with the Akatsuki? Is this some sort of cult I've joined?*

Deidara briefly considered burrowing into the nearest face of the mountain and just sitting there, thinking, but it was a laughable plan. Kakuzu would be on him before he could blink. Twice he'd almost been killed by the thread user, and once by Hidan. The attempts on his life were obviously

for show, he knew, but it was still a bit disturbing to wake up in the middle of the night to find a hand wrapped around your throat.

Something was up in this group of shinobi. Something that wasn't quite... right.

True, it was a common stereotype that the stronger you got as a ninja the more eccentricities you got. And if that rumor was true, this would be the biggest group of psychos in the world. But even that was excused in light of the fact that they were keeping secrets. Dangerous secrets.

Secrets about immortality and Jinchuuriki and distrust among the ranks. Secrets that raised questions that a nosy blue-eyed blonde probably shouldn't be asking. And while Deidara knew this, he also knew that it wouldn't stop him from trying to discover everything he could about the Akatsuki.

What did he mean... 'let's see if you can bleed'? He thought abstractly, making his first lap around the mountain. When he glanced back toward his starting point, Sasori was sitting on the edge of the cliff, looking out toward the vast forest below. Still in full uniform, the collar and length hiding anything and everything from the world. Sasori was hiding something as well, and the Suna-nin was the easiest target for him inside the Akatsuki.

Sasori glanced back and their eyes locked. Deidara grinned viciously at him, and he just frowned and looked away in response.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oooh, I smell a conspiracy! Deidara is hellbent on finding out whatever Sasori's hiding, and will use any means necessary to get that information. Meanwhile, our princess is having her own problems with her teacher: like how she's still terrified of him! How can she manage to concentrate on training with a teacher like Itachi?

A Tale of Two Princesses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The blue-haired kunoichi delicately sat on the edge of her bed, folding her hands in her lap. The image of a perfect lady (Hinata knew all too well what *that* was supposed to look like). She surveyed the Hyuuga coolly with lidded eyes, the faintest shadow of a smile upon her lips. Hinata just stood there, awkward and with a reeling mind.

"...So." The woman said presently. Hinata didn't jump, though her voice startled her nonetheless.

"U-Um..." After a brief moment, the heiress bowed at the waist, her long hair falling down around her shoulders. "My-My name is Hyuuga Hinata, and I am very pleased to finally m-meet you, Kunoichi-san."

"That is what I am, not who I am." She replied simply, though didn't offer her name in return. She reached up to gently touch the white flower in her hair, and then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The rest of her azure hair was held up in a messy bun, the keyword being *messy*; several locks and strands hung down randomly. But the overall look only made her look all that more elegant. "I am also the only female member of the Akatsuki, for the time being. ...But I believe you already knew that, Hyuuga-san?" The woman stayed politely formal, though whether it was because they first met or because she knew just who Hinata was, she had no idea.

"Y-Yes. I mean... I hadn't known there was a female member until I saw you in the hallway that one day..." The Konoha chuunin finished lamely, realizing now that she would only end up embarrassing herself in this situation. She could've smacked herself for it.

The Akatsuki member smiled politely. "Are there any questions in particular you'd like to ask me, Hyuuga-san? Provided that I am allowed to inform you, a non-member." She deliberately put that last sentence out there, making it perfectly clear to both of them that any information that was said in this room would be kept to themselves.

"I... I just... don't know." The white-eyed girl looked away nervously, trying to avoid pressing her fingers together. (It was a bad habit, she knew, and Itachi had implied that he'd snap her fingers next time he saw her doing that.) She decided to go out on a limb, and asked, "M-May I ask your name...?"

"I suppose you may." The woman's lidded gaze and soft smile made the statement seem more mysterious than what it probably was.

But when she didn't continue, Hinata was forced to ask, "And wh-what *is* your name...?"

"You may call me Konan, Hyuuga-san."

Hinata relaxed, finally having a name to work with. She sat down on the floor in front of the bed, her ramen cooling and neglected. After that simple disclosure by Konan, it seemed that the floodgates had been opened. The Hyuuga heiress had been with nothing but men since her brief stay with Usuki, and that wasn't exactly nice (until that last night, of course). It felt *good* to be able to talk with another female, even if said female was probably much older and definitely more skilled than her.

"What's it like, in the Akatsuki? Living with all of these shinobi, all the risks...?"

"I'd imagine that you know a fair amount of what that life is like already, Hyuuga-san. You've been here for a month now and have met most of the members. You know what they're like." She replied pleasantly.

"A-Ah." Hinata ducked her head in embarrassment, pressing her index fingers together. "S-Sorry... Um... if I may ask, who is your partner in the group...? Is-Is he someone I don't know?"

"I am partnered with a man named Pein." Konan smiled mysteriously, brushing another lock of hair out of her mascara-rimmed eyes. The other kunoichi didn't know who that was, but she seriously doubted that she knew him. For all she knew, the Akatsuki had twenty more members, and having only ten was a façade for ignorant villagers like herself.

"I see. Umm... What is your home village... if I may ask?" She asked meekly, still wary of offending her.

The blunette just kept her placid smile on her face, replying, "Amegakure is the closest thing I ever had to a proper home village." Hinata had a feeling that she had avoided the question or was hiding something, but it would be rude—not to mention stupid—to mention that.

The questions got more and more casual as the time progressed. Hinata was finding herself liking Konan, though the woman maintained some semblance of formality in her answering. She had turned to calling her 'Hinata-san', however. (Hinata was debating on whether to call her 'Konan-san' or 'Konan-senpai', truth be told. She was still nervous about addressing other members.) They'd even gotten to the point where she was asking just plain questions, such as her favorite color or food.

The Hyuuga had a feeling that even if Konan was keeping aloof and formal, she was starting to possibly forge a new friendship.

-.-.-

Once upon an old, old age, the princess had thought she was alone in the world. Her white knight ignored her, her father, the king, looked down upon her, and anyone else she might've had was pushed away because of etiquette and formalities. The princess was a very lonely soul, and that knowledge made her melancholic.

But the first metaphorical ray of sunshine to hit the princess's face came soon enough. She got three precious people who soon almost replaced her family, in terms of closeness. The princess had two adoptive brothers and a woman that might've been her mother—and a playful little puppy that she adored. This cheered the princess up considerably, and her positive outlook returned. Soon, and with much happiness, the previously secluded princess began to make more and more friends. Her knights became her friends, especially her leading knight. The princess was *happy*.

But all good things must come to an end.

The cycle repeated itself when the dragon kidnapped her, taking her away from all those bonds she had forged and carefully protected within her heart. One by one, those bonds were destroyed and burned in the dragon's fire, until she was clinging to her remaining one—the one to her leading knight, the one sworn to protect her. The princess sheltered that bond, keeping it alive and warm within her mind and soul; she swore never to let it die. Still, she fell into the grasp of loneliness

again, seeing each of the relationships she was too late to save wither and die before her eyes.

The princess almost jealously guarded over her last bond, almost draconic in the way she hoarded that precious treasure.

But soon enough, new bonds began to replace the old. The dragon turned out to be much kinder than she'd originally thought, and the two formed their own friendship. She met more and more characters in her fairytale, more dragons and knights and all sorts of other interesting creatures. The dragons, she discovered, weren't as bad as she'd so naïvely believed. The freedom from her kingdom at first made her dizzy, but now she was adjusting and was somewhat horrified at some of the old laws and traditions she had blindly followed.

More and more bonds appeared in her heart, but still the princess covetously sheltered them from everyone else. She'd already lost too many to lose any more.

Slowly, she was regaining her former happiness. It was more of a true happiness, since she wasn't tied down by her kingdom and her perspectives of 'good and evil' any longer. Her spirit was becoming stronger, and she was learning to fend for herself, outside of her usual knights' protection.

But then, the princess discovered something startling. That one last bond that had survived, the one with her dear knight, had evolved into something... more. More than affection, more than respect, possibly even more than trust. This confused the princess greatly. She found herself hoping every day to see that courageous knight again, to talk to him and to listen to him and to... she didn't know. She just knew that she wanted to see that not-quite-so-white knight dearly again.

What also confused the princess was some of the other dragons' behavior. They were just as ruthless and cunning as legends depicted, but they also had their own morals and rules. She was learning to fit in with the dragons, adapting. The dragons accepted her into their ranks. It was bizarre to fit in with *dragons*, the villains of a fairytale, but the princess was too glad of fitting in at all, anywhere, to question this. It was puzzling, but it made her happy.

There were trials and tribulations for the princess to overcome, but she had managed so far. It made her proud to see how far she had come. She could tell that it made her dragon proud as well, and possibly some of the others. This pleased her greatly; she was valued for who she was, not what her blood was.

Then the princess met *another* princess.

This was the princess—or perhaps even the *queen*—of the dragons. She fit in perfectly with them all, even possibly draconic herself. The princess was overjoyed to meet her, however, and slowly, the two found similarities and common interests between them. A new bond was forming, but for the first time, between two princesses of the same fairytale.

The princess from the leaves of the forest was regaining all of her former happiness, and creating new bonds with her new friends. Possibly even creating a draconic knight or two. She was perfectly content.

But that was when the head dragon gave them all a mission.

Next Chapter: Oh Jashin-sama! There's another mission already?! I wonder what would be so important that it'd interrupt the new recruit's oh-so important training? And is Konan really as polite as she seems, or is that just a ruse?

Tipping the Scales

Chapter Notes

To Answer a Question: (it'd be easier to answer in a review reply, but 'nada' doesn't have an account X3)

Why Deidara was confused about Sasori's immortality in chapter 42.

Basically, I know there was a gap, and that it may be confusing. But there was also a one-month gap between that, to keep in mind.

Deidara had his suspicions about Sasori, but pushed them to the back of his mind during that time. He was confused about his partner in part because of some of the things Hidan and Kakuzu implied as well. The whole subject of immortality is a contradiction for him: Hidan was the only one he really knows for sure to be 'immortal', because of him being beheaded and living. But at the same time, he knows Hidan can bleed; he's never seen Sasori spill even a drop of blood. He's fairly certain that Sasori could be immortal, though more certain that he's just really hard to kill instead of being impossible to kill. He's more confused about what Sasori is. Plus, Leader-sama has threatened to kill Sasori and Sasori has taken this seriously, working against Deidara's theory that the redhead is really 'immortal'.

Hope that clears up some questions for y'all!

((2022 crosspost update: wow, remember when we had to do THAT? thank god for ao3's commenting system.))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Time passed quickly when spent in the company of a group of S-ranked criminals and mass murderers.

Deidara could now make it six (and a half!) laps around the mountain in ten minutes. Just a week ago Sasori had admitted that he was making sufficient progress on his speed and was now in a close race with Hidan for the honorable position of being the slowest in the organization. The blonde couldn't have been more pleased; he was *finally* catching up.

Speed was the easy thing, though. Getting his art up to par was more complicated. After all, there was only so much chakra clay can hold, and though he didn't know its exact limit, he figured his C3 was probably pushing it. (Sasori announced, one day when walking in on him working with his clay, that he was going to someday blow himself up by forcing too much chakra into it.) It helped, though, that the more his physical speed progressed, his clay creations' speed did.

Once he figured out a proper way to increase his ninjutsu's power, however, the Akatsuki had better watch its back. He'd created more than one bad relationship in his sparse few months in it.

But unfortunately, for as much progress as he'd made, the deadline for that Jinchuuriki mission was drawing ever closer. He now only had a sparse two months to finish preparing, and while his speed was probably and key in the coming fight, it wouldn't do anything if he couldn't figure out how to get past that armor of sand.

And the blonde hadn't been making any progress whatsoever with Sasori and his secrets, either, infuriatingly enough. Every single day, *every* one, he'd asked several questions, attempted to bribe, blackmail and even seduce the man, but the redheaded artist was stubborn and unmoving. He seemed sworn not to tell his partner anything. Deidara's imagination was supplying plenty of theories behind the secrecy of the members (particularly Sasori), but as time went on, they got more and more fantastic and improbable. The only way he was going to get that information was to get it from someone.

It was a rather hot day, but Deidara had gotten used to running at full speed in such heat. (As well as one *can* get used to such things.) He was making excellent time, and the explosives user was hoping to break his record and make it a whole seven laps in his allotted ten minutes. The chances were good that he would, and then he had bragging rights for the next week. Sasori and he had this unspoken agreement that every time Deidara managed to get another lap in, he would be allowed to gloat all he wanted. But heaven forbid if he missed the deadline; Sasori was merciless in making sure he *knew* that he failed.

Judging by his internal clock, he had about thirty seconds to get done with this lap and make the seven-lap mark. Unless something went horribly wrong or he died in a freak accident, Deidara was about to have all week to annoy his 'older' partner. Revenge was always fun for a ninja, regardless of their rank or loyalty.

He swung off of the nearest branch, hitting the ground running, sprinting for it. It didn't matter if he used up his remaining stamina; he'd taken up the habit of merely stopping running after ten minutes were up, instead of ten laps. (Though after the Suna-nin realized this, he made his life hell in other ways.) One last bend around the mountain trail, and it would be nothing but the flat stone of the cliffside where Sasori would be regrettably waiting for him.

With four seconds to spare, Deidara completed his seventh lap around the mountain.

Life was good.

--.-

Sasori groaned mentally. He ran a hand through his hair, setting the other on his hip. Deidara had managed to get seven laps in ten minutes. There was nothing wrong with progress, of course, though the gloating got annoying after the first second or so. And the faster he was, the better he could dodge and the safer he would be. (And a safer Deidara meant a safer Sasori.)

But the problem was simply this: he hadn't been aware at just *how* much progress the blonde had made. It was arguably the fastest progress any shinobi had ever made in the category of speed, as far as Sasori knew. In fact, seven laps in ten minutes... was better than half of the organization.

Hidan could only get about five and a half laps in, and Zetsu—without traveling through the ground—could only accomplish six. Kakuzu, Kisame and Konan were also at the seventh lap mark. Sasori himself only had about eight. Admittedly, the last time they'd *measured* their speeds had been around a year ago—when Hidan had joined—but Deidara's speed was alarming. He wasn't supposed to be catching up to their level this quickly; it would throw everything off.

Deidara looked up at him, having bent over to either cough up a lung or possibly throw up again. He grinned elatedly, though his chest was heaving and he was soaked in sweat. "Seven... laps...

yeah... how's... that... danna...?" He panted. Sasori had to wonder whether it was sheer spite that was keeping him on his feet right then. His respirational rate alone should've been supplying enough oxygen to make him faint.

Sasori could *not* let him know how much progress he'd shown. "Eh." He grunted, looking away. "I've seen better, brat."

But unfortunately, the Iwa-nin was catching up to their ranks in other ways as well. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his younger partner narrow his eyes, still panting, and spat out, "*Liar...*"

"I'm not lying. I've seen better. Seven laps is nothing to be proud of, Deidara." He lied coolly. Lying was second nature to shinobi.

But so was seeing through lies. Deidara stood up straight, and the redhead knew that he knew he was lying. The blonde was annoyingly adept at picking up skills and knowledge that he didn't particularly need (yet), and they both knew it. The pair stared at each other, faces blank masks, eyes trying to break through the façades they'd both built up over time. So many unspoken things passed between them in that moment, and Sasori knew that it was out of his control now.

"What... are you...?" Deidara asked, his breathing starting to return to normal.

Instead of answering, the redhead carefully and silently slid out one of his many blades, concealing it in his sleeve. Quick as lightning, he slashed it through the air, aimed for his neck and aiming to kill. The decapitated *Kage Bunshin* disappeared in a puff of smoke, predictably, and Sasori immediately felt the taller artist's presence behind him. He stood perfectly still, staring straight ahead.

Deidara leaned down, breathing, "*Answer my questions.*"

"How do I know I can trust you? We are shinobi; information is invaluable." He replied carefully. Sasori knew he wasn't going to get out of this easily without spilling blood—or worse.

"I'm your partner, yeah." He said simply.

And it was for precisely that same reason that the puppeteer knew he could. "Deidara... I don't want to spoil your perfect image of our group." He stated sarcastically, trying hard not to scowl at the dirt below. The blonde didn't say anything. Though after nearly three months, no doubt his dream of the greatest group of shinobi in the world had already been tarnished. "I will tell you everything after you capture your Jinchuuriki."

"*No.* I'm tired of your circles—tell me what you're hiding already, yeah!" A blade pressed into the small of his back. Not that Sasori couldn't have disarmed him in the blink of an eye, or merely killed him similarly—he still *was* stronger than him, he knew—or possibly even let the kunai dig into his back for the pleasure of watching Deidara's shock, but none of the choices would be wise in the current situation. Deidara couldn't know everything just yet. Not until he'd captured his own Jinchuuriki, fulfilled his part of the plan.

Otherwise it'd be impossible to get him to go after the Ichibi, and he wouldn't dare help the leader of the Akatsuki. That would tear the organization in two, and a riot with the deadliest ninja in the world is not something that world really wants to see. They couldn't spill unnecessary blood just yet.

Not to mention the fact that Deidara would get caught in the crossfire. The Leader would go after him personally, and he would likewise do the same for Sasori. The redhead didn't particularly care

about himself; he'd lived long enough as it was, and that wasn't likely to stop anytime soon. But, much to his dismay, Sasori had found that he'd grown almost... *attached* to the blonde. Forced into protecting him had grown into a sort of likeable protection, and having another artist around—even if he was as infuriatingly incorrect about the concept of art—was a refreshing experience. Deidara had a personality one didn't find too often in the higher ranks of shinobi-kind. And Sasori had to admit that Deidara was fairly smart; he knew the world around him, even if he didn't show it.

"Am I interrupting something?" A voice called out.

The pair jumped guiltily, fully aware of what they could have been just doing. Sasori's head snapped over to glare at the arriving kunoichi. Konan just smiled blankly, like she always did, and regarded them both with a lidded gaze.

"Who the hell are *you*, yeah?!" Deidara squawked in surprise. Obviously he'd gotten past the ninja part of his mind and went back into annoying mode. The blue-haired kunoichi continued to smile politely, while Sasori could have smacked him. (As if the fact that she was wearing her uniform didn't give it away.)

"I am merely a messenger of Pein, Deidara-san." She stated brightly, closing her eyes. Sasori could have killed her with the glare he directed at her; *why* in gods' name did she have to further confuse him and instigate things? Deidara couldn't even begin to comprehend what she had just said, though judging by the look on his face, it looked like he was trying.

"*What* is it? We were training, you know. For the Ichibi mission...?" The redheaded Suna-nin gave her an equally lidded glare, kicking himself mentally. No doubt she'd run back and tell the leader all about whatever she had just heard... but the good side was that she might not have heard anything at all.

"I am aware of that, Sasori-san." Konan said. She folded her hands in front of her. "But I have merely arrived to inform you of a new mission." She procured a scroll from her sleeve, holding it out with another fake smile. "It takes place in Amegakure. I'm sure you will both be pleased to hear that one of the Akatsuki's main missions is almost coming to fruition. It's time for the Rain Lord to get out of the picture. This scroll has all of the information you'll need, including the location, aliases you'll use, names and abilities of the bodyguards he employs, and your... team members."

"*Team*?" Sasori's jaw dropped.

"What do you mean, 'team', yeah?!" Deidara echoed. His voice was still rather hoarse from his running, and he didn't seem any happier at the fact that he was getting assigned another mission—by someone he didn't know.

Konan just smiled mysteriously, gave a small wave, and flickered out of existence with a *Shunshin*. A few scraps of paper fluttered down to the ground where she was standing. Sasori hastily opened the scroll, scanning over it while Deidara attempted to read over his shoulder. The redhead irritably turned so he couldn't, though his partner just followed him. They continued like that, mostly to spite each other, until finally the Iwa-nin gave up, and shuffled off to sulk.

Sasori gave a smug snicker, and continued reading the details. It was an assassination mission... to kill the Rain Lord. The leader had been involved in a bloody civil war in Ame for quite some time; this final piece would probably decide the war in his favor. It would be tricky, though, even for an Akatsuki member or two; the lord knew this as well, and was on high alert.

Thus there was a need for secrecy.

But the more Sasori read of the mission's details, the more he didn't like it. It would be one thing to simply swoop in, behead the man and run like the devil himself was on their asses, and frankly it would be much simpler. But oh no; the leader wanted *finesse*. He didn't want this instantly tracked back to his organization, and he wanted to stir the nation up further. If he could frame someone else, or perhaps bring some fictional new players into his little game, it would work invaluable in his favor.

When he saw the official members on the team assembled, Sasori decided that he *definitely* did not like this mission.

-.-.-

Hinata halted, blinking once. Everything here was... too quiet. She mentally smacked herself, glancing around her 'room'. It was too perfect; it couldn't be real. "Itachi-senpai... how long have I been in the genjutsu...?" She asked quietly, hating how he had often cast a genjutsu around her without informing her of it—and worse, how she couldn't manage to figure it out until quite a time later.

The Uchiha stepped out of her shadow, Sharingan slowly spinning. "Much too long. You'd be dead by now, kunoichi. Your progress is minimal." He reprimanded her, and she flinched as though struck. The genjutsu around her melted away into darkness, and she found herself again in that dimly lit training room.

Hinata sighed; *she* thought she'd been making wonderful progress, learning genjutsu left and right and dispelling most of them he cast on her (those that he cast with a warning, of course), but every time she thought that he would just make one of his harsh, true comments and knock her down a few pegs. She knew it was probably for the best, but she already had a fragile self-esteem at best and his methods definitely weren't improving that.

Their relationship hadn't improved at all, either. In fact, if it was possible, she was even more scared of him than she had been at first. Itachi really had broken two of her fingers when he noticed her pushing them together, successfully breaking her of that habit. He also cast genjutsu on her at random, and it wasn't always illusions; the *Kaihou Omoi* turned against her wasn't a pleasant thing. Unfortunately she'd also discovered several more of the emotion-based genjutsus by being the victim of them. Hidan had nearly taken advantage of her when she'd been in the 'overconfident' one.

The fact that Itachi could do such things to her frightened her terribly. But the strangest thing was that she couldn't *hate* the man for it. Dislike him, yes, and disprove of his teaching methods, but they were undeniably effective. Itachi was too emotionless to be either liked or disliked, really. He was making great progress with her, and she'd learnt two more *Kaihou Omoi*, one more concealment jutsu and several dozen basic attack-based genjutsus. She could now also dispel most genjutsu at jounin-level or below, if she had some sort of warning. Caught unawares, however, it still took an embarrassing amount of time for her to notice an illusion.

She looked up miserably at him, about to apologize, when there was a soft knock at the door. She blinked in surprise; Itachi didn't do anything aside from reply, "Come in."

What was even more surprising was that it was Konan who walked in. She was smiling that pleasant-mysterious-blank smile of hers, hands folded in front of her stomach. The blue-haired

kunoichi bowed to them both, closing her eyes. Hinata hastily bowed back, though Itachi didn't do anything. "H-Hello, Konan-senpai."

"Hello Hinata-san. I am here with a mission," Straightening back up, she withdrew a scroll from her sleeve, offering it to Itachi. "From the leader. It is to assassinate the Rain Lord. All of the details you will need are in that scroll."

He wordlessly took the scroll, immediately opening it and scanning it with his Sharingan. The heiress spared him a glance, wondering how handy it would be to have eyes that would copy anything and memorize it for you, and then turned back to Konan. "Is-Is that all?"

"Yes, I believe so, Hinata-san." The woman stated dryly. "I'll be seeing you around, then..."

"See you...!"

"A lot sooner than you'd think." With that last puzzling remark, she left the pair in the hazy darkness once more. Hinata tried to figure out what she'd meant, while Itachi was still reading his mission's details.

What did she mean...? Is she going to take over teaching me or something...? Just the mere thought of it brought a guilty relief to her. She really did appreciate the fact that she was training under an Uchiha, the master of genjutsu, but Itachi was just so... *scary*. And impassive. The man's expression never changed, nor did his tone. Konan, though hardly more expressive, was at least a loose friend of hers. Plus she doubted she'd be quite so... severe in her teaching methods.

The Uchiha sneezed quietly, rolling up the scroll. The scarlet eyes turned once more on the red-eye-phobic Hyuuga. "...Interesting. I have an assassination mission with a team of other Akatsuki personnel." He informed her matter-of-factly.

"Um... yay?" She was unsure why he was telling her this, exactly. She didn't technically need to know, and that was basically what Konan said, anyway.

"Sasori and Deidara are part of the team." He added, watching her.

"...Oh." That could have been why he chose to tell her; it would mean that she would be alone in the hideout, without Deidara, or Sasori, or even Itachi to protect her. Alone among the wolves. There was always Konan or Tobi...

Itachi turned and walked toward the door, the torchlight glinting off of his necklace's beads. He paused at the doorway, turning back to look at her. "Coming?" She must've looked confused at the question, for he elaborated, "You're on the list as well."

-.-.-

An hour later, Deidara found himself trying hard to read over the boring political reasoning behind the assassination attempt while simultaneously trying hard not to fall asleep. The scroll was *boring*. He'd picked up exactly what he, personally, needed to know in the first skim-over, but Sasori demanded that he read the whole thing.

He hadn't had the chance to question the Suna-nin again.

The assembled team for the mission stood awkwardly in front of the leader, looking either nervous, tired, bored or impassive. Deidara was of the third kind; he was actually only half-listening to the leader, instead choosing that rather inappropriate time to read the scroll. Sasori, beside him, was looking both bored and impassive at the same time, which was more of a feat than what it sounded like.

What was really surprising, though, was that the Hyuuga kunoichi had been requested for this mission. It would make sense with her bloodline limit, but Deidara didn't particularly like the idea of her on this mission. Especially when he read the exact details; the more he read, the more he didn't like it. Not only was it an assassination, they were also supposed to retrieve two scrolls, a wall hanging and a ceremonial dagger from the lord's mansion. As well as anything else they could pillage.

But it was the disguises they would have to adopt that really bugged him. *Somehow* the leader had found out about him picking up the *Oiroke* jutsu (probably thanks to Kabuto) and had fit that nicely into the plans. Sasori got the easy job—he got to be the visiting lord from one of the smaller countries.

When asked why *Sasori* got to be the lord, the leader just snappishly replied, "All the Rain Lord knows about his visitor is that he is short and has red hair."

Deidara was meant to be one of the 'girls' he traveled with, which not only meant keeping that jutsu up constantly, but it also meant that he had to *act* like a girl. And here he'd thought the Akatsuki was all about reserving dignity.

The one upside was that Itachi was also in the same predicament, though admittedly taking the assignment with a lot more grace.

"Any further questions?" The leader asked, his impatience showing. Having to deal with eight shinobi at once was probably understandably grating on his nerves quite a lot.

"Uh, yeah!" Hidan raised his hand, giving the shadowed man a strange look. "So... *why* the fuck is the chick coming with?" He pointed over toward the Hyuuga, who ducked her head and looked away immediately.

"Well, if you'd like to take her place as a concubine and magically grow the Byakugan, be my guest." The leader replied as calmly as he could. Deidara stifled a snicker behind his hand. Hidan's glare turned on him instead.

"What the hell are *you* laughing at, pretty boy? I at least get to stay my natural gender for the mission. You get to become a fuckin' transvestite." The immortal snarled. Hidan had the lucky job of being Sasori's bodyguard—a *male* bodyguard. Deidara just flipped him off, trying hard not to rise to the bait as he continued reading.

There was a pause, and then Sasori calmly raised his hand. "I think we are all clear on the mission, Leader-sama." He stated in his usual monotone. Kakuzu looked ready to contradict the statement, but evidently thought better of it and remained silent. He'd been moody that he couldn't join them (especially in the pillaging). Kisame, on the other hand, was having a fun time laughing at them all. Or rather, just the Iwa-nin and the Konoha missing-nin, as they were the only ones required to live in a sexy jutsu for the next month.

The mission was simple, at face value. Sasori, the lord of a distant and obscure country, was traveling through the Rain to visit his good friend, the Rain's Lord. He was traveling with his bodyguard, Hidan, and four of his favorite girls, though only two of them would actually be female.

(The leader just said that he wanted as many Akatsuki members in there as possible without arousing suspicion; he wanted this to go smoothly. He said in no uncertain terms that if they messed up in the slightest they'd be killed.) Kisame and Kakuzu would stay in the nearby area, ready as backup. Most likely they wouldn't be needed, but the leader was pulling out all of the stops on this mission.

Go in, assassinate the guy, steal the scrolls and other stuff, get out within a month. And the leader will have Amegakure to show for it. Simple, right?

Unfortunately, 'simple' didn't belong in the same sentence with 'Akatsuki'.

They hadn't even left the room when half the assembled team was fighting with each other. Itachi sighed audibly, though it didn't stop either Deidara or Hidan having to be restrained forcibly by their partners. The Hyuuga giggled nervously, hiding behind the redhead. Konan, or whatever that blue-haired kunoichi's name was, was perfectly at ease.

"I can see how the rest of this mission is going to go." Kisame snickered, clapping his partner on the back. The shorter ninja glared up at him, but the Kiri-nin just laughed at him instead. Grinning, revealing his sharpened teeth, he couldn't resist adding, "So let's see this '*Oiroke no jutsu*' you're going to have to live in." The idea of transforming into a naked lady had most of the other male members of the group laughing when they heard about it.

Deidara flipped him off as well, pretending to try and continue reading the mission scroll. But the fact of the matter was that he was dreadfully nervous about this. Even if the jutsu was developed by some pervert somewhere, and even if it was just a modified *Henge*, having it up constantly for up to a month would be taxing. And even if they weren't allowed to use any other jutsus that were visible or required hand signs, if it got messy, he'd have to use jutsu and use even more chakra.

"Yeah, I wanna see this jutsu." Hidan smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. He raised his eyebrows expectantly. "And besides, Itachi has to copy it with his Sharingan. I wanna see the transvestite jutsu in action."

"Shove it, yeah." Deidara turned his back to them, face red and trying hard to look like he was still reading.

"It-It's not a transvestite jutsu..." Shockingly, the Hyuuga kunoichi spoke up, drawing everyone's attention. She blushed and looked down at her feet, but continued, "It was designed as a distraction jutsu... It u-usually knocks out most male ninja..." She looked like she might've said something more, but decided against it.

Kakuzu looked at her for a moment, then slowly asked, "Are you saying... this is a Konoha jutsu?" All eyes instantly went to Itachi, then.

"It must have been developed *after* I defected from the village." He clarified, though Deidara could've sworn he saw the Uchiha redden a bit.

But it would make sense, though. Kabuto was the one he'd copied it from, and he had been stationed in Konohagakure for several years. He would've picked it up there, and it also explained how the Hyuuga recognized it as that particular jutsu and not a regular *Henge*. "Did someone you know invent it, Bya-chan?" He couldn't help but ask.

"Uhh..." The hesitant tone in her voice made it very clear that she did, in fact, know the inventor of the perverted jutsu. The other Akatsuki members, minus Konan, Sasori and Itachi, crowded in eagerly. "It was... um... Uzumaki N-Naruto..." It looked like it cost her a lot to admit that,

whereas Hidan looked like Christmas had come early. (If his religion celebrated the holiday, of course.)

"The *Kyuubi* invented that jutsu?! You gotta be shitting me!" He crowed, cracking up. Itachi winced, already knowing just how much strife this knowledge would bring him. Most of the other guys were laughing as well, Deidara included. He hadn't pegged the whiskered blonde as such a pervert before!

"*What* are you all still doing out here...?" The leader's voice cut through the laughing like a hot knife through butter, and everyone gave a guilty start. "*You have a mission*. The clock is ticking; get going!"

They ran for it, Deidara grabbing his kunoichi partner's wrist and hastily pulling her away from the others. He'd have to talk to her, but unfortunately, Sasori hovered behind him like a shadow. It would be impossible at this time.

-.-.-

Hinata gasped in delight. Though she was deeply disturbed at having to play the role of a concubine and nervous to the point of a breakdown about what it may or may not entail, the heiress could simply not deny that her many outfits were *beautiful*. She and Konan were both in one of the many rooms of the hideout, which was apparently full of clothes for missions. The pair were in the female section, which was, understandably, much larger than the male's. Probably because it was full of some of the most gorgeous kimonos, dresses and outfits that the younger kunoichi had ever seen.

Even as the heir to the prestigious Hyuuga clan, she'd never seen anything quite so exotic or beautiful as some of them.

Konan led her down the narrow row between the clothes, looking around boredly for some specific outfit that she'd need. Hinata, however, was practically drooling over everything they passed; she was a sucker for beautiful clothes and this was just plain over the top. "Where did you... where did you get these?" She asked in awe.

"We buy them, we steal them, and I've made a few of them. We just... acquire clothes." Konan shrugged nonchalantly, her cloak rustling around her ankles as she walked. Hinata nodded, still awestruck. Even her most decorative kimono wasn't *this* nice. Her mind couldn't even begin to comprehend what several of the dresses could sell for.

Presently the two stopped, and Konan turned to pick up the nearest outfit. She held it up against her body, judging its size, then offered it to Hinata. "Try this one on. It'd be too large for me in the chest, but I think it would fit you."

Hinata sighed mentally at the mention of the chest; annoyingly large breasts were her curse. She took the kimono, holding it up against herself, judging it. It was a beautiful color, a rich indigo that would match the hair tie Usuki gave her perfectly. The sash was white with a black horizontal slash, contrasting but fitting in nicely regardless.

Trying it on, however, the dark-haired girl found out that she did *not* like it after all.

It kept slipping off of her shoulders, and while she knew that it was probably supposed to do that,

it was annoying. And what was worse was that it had a slit up to the waist that she hadn't noticed before. The worst thing about it was probably the fact that it had a low cut in the front. A *very* low cut. Hinata was showing more cleavage than she had ever done so before in her life, and she was *not* comfortable with it. She hastily and with much blushing tried in vain to haul it up to cover more of her chest.

Konan noticed this, frowning slightly. "Hinata-san..." She started, but Hinata just shook her head.

"I know, I know... it's supposed to be like this... but I-I just don't like it..." She said apologetically, trying to resist the urge to pull at the fabric.

"That's not what I was going to say." The female Akatsuki member shook her head gently, placing a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Hinata-san... *listen to me*. This is a serious mission. Possibly higher than an A- or S-rank. Your role in this mission, bluntly put, is to act like a concubine. Act like a whore, look like a whore, talk like a whore. You're only supposed to *think* like a kunoichi."

The meek girl ducked her head in shame. She knew all of this, but it was difficult enough without her giving her a pep talk for it.

"You are going to have to listen to every request of Sasori or even the Rain Lord. Sasori is going to try his best to protect us all, but it's inevitable that something is going to happen. It's our job to deflect any interest the Lord may have in either Deidara or Itachi, as they'll be vulnerable enough with that jutsu on constantly without added attention. I'll try to likewise protect you, but you're going to have to grow up and act like a kunoichi, Hinata-san."

Subconsciously, the Hyuuga had probably known all of that, but being told it awoke a new determination in her. What the woman said was true; they were going to walk on the kunai's edge on this mission. If she was assigned to be a concubine, Hinata vowed that she would do her best to try to go against her ingrown shyness and act like one. If only to help both Deidara and Itachi. She had been spoiled in Konohagakure and in her clan, and now she was thrust into the real world, with all too real missions for kunoichi.

"Kunoichi rule number one..." The dark-haired girl murmured. There were the standard shinobi rules in the world, but long ago some bright kunoichi had decided to be sardonic and make up the infamous 'kunoichi rules'. They weren't official, though every kunoichi on the planet had to have heard them—and live by them.

Konan smiled, though there wasn't any warmth or humor in it. "'Your body is your greatest weapon.'"

Hinata let the sleeves slide back down, baring her shoulders, and gave up trying to hold up the front. She could deal with this. She wasn't a weak little girl anymore; she was a kunoichi and she had the Akatsuki backing her up. She was the heir of the Hyuuga clan, and the genjutsu student of Uchiha Itachi. She could do this.

"Now let's pick out a kimono for the boys, shall we?"

She had almost forgotten that they, as the actual females of the team, would have to pick out suitable outfits for their females-to-be. And as well as one for Konan.

Nearly an hour later, the pair gathered up the chosen outfits, smiling smugly at their accomplishment. Both of the kunoichi had several outfits for themselves, but also planned on receiving gifts (as was customary for lords to do, evidently). They only had a spare few dresses and

kimonos for the men, mostly because they couldn't pick out too many without knowing their sizes. But when they reunited with the other, rather bored looking members, they were all decidedly male.

"Why aren't either of you... female?" Konan asked, somewhat confused. She set down her armful of clothes, frowning slightly as she wiped a lock of her azure hair out of her eyes.

Deidara shrugged noncommittally, muttering, "Didn't know what kind of girl..."

Itachi just added, "I have to copy it from *him*."

Konan sighed, and Hinata felt sorry for her. She would be in charge of the girls, if only because she was naturally born into that gender and the oldest one. This mission was definitely going to get frustrating for all of them. "Haven't you ever seen a concubine, Deidara-san...?" She asked in a slightly strained voice.

Blushing lightly, he shook his head. "I wasn't exactly high enough in the social order in Iwagakure to have met many, yeah." Itachi rolled his eyes, but thankfully the blonde didn't catch it.

The blunette's expression didn't change, but it was hard to miss the exasperation in her tone. "You would most likely get away with... a slim figure. Average sized breasts and hips. And long hair is a must for most concubine."

Many of the men looked like they couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

Hinata reddened, wondering how *her* figure fit into that stereotype of a concubine. The Uchiha dropped his head into his hands, looking like he severely regretted taking on this mission. (Hidan was obviously trying to hold back laughter.)

Deidara stood up with a groan, face slightly pink, mumbling, "Let's get this over with, yeah... Slim, average, long hair. Got it, yeah." Forming the hand signs, he called, "*Oiroke no jutsu!*"

He disappeared in a puff of nin-smoke. As it cleared, leaving small wisps, Hinata nearly fainted. It seemed that Deidara *still* hadn't gotten past the default setting of the jutsu; a busty, blonde, undeniably slim, *naked* woman stood there, looking like she wanted to kill herself for lacking clothes yet again.

"...I take it the default of the jutsu is... *that*...?" Itachi groaned, looking rather red-faced. Hidan, who'd been sitting beside him, promptly fainted from a nosebleed. Sasori looked like he'd seen a ghost, or possibly that he was about to copy the silver-haired man. Kisame looked paler than she'd ever seen him before, and Kakuzu... looked like he was about to die laughing.

Hinata wordlessly handed him—or her, she didn't know what Deidara was at the moment—one of the kimonos to cover up with. The blonde gratefully slipped it on, rather quickly, giving all of the men behind him a rather dirty glare. "Perverts. It's just a jutsu, yeah." He groused in a high, very feminine voice. Then the *Henged* Akatsuki member grinned savagely, pointing to Itachi. "*Your turn!*"

The genjutsu specialist looked like he'd rather slit his own throat, but stood up. He took one of the kimonos from his student ahead of time, glancing at her for a brief moment with his Sharingan. Then, without a word to her, Itachi turned and muttered, "*Oiroke no jutsu.*" The same cloud of nin-smoke, slowly clearing to reveal a curvy, black-haired, red-eyed, attractive, unclothed and undeniably Itachi-looking woman. Kisame joined Hidan on the floor in the ranks of 'those knocked out by massive nosebleed'.

Itachi just slid on the kimono, tying the obi firmly around his waist. "This is... odd." He stated in a husky, though womanly, voice. He took a moment to examine himself, obviously irked at his longer hair, which had fallen out of its ponytail. "It's more stable than a regular *Henge*."

Konan eyed them both skeptically. "A bit bustier than what I had suggested, but irrefutably effective. Nice to see that the jutsu is quite... detailed."

Deidara was looking rather put-off about the fact that he still had the rather obvious mouths on his hands, frowning when the blue-haired woman handed him some gloves. Unfortunately, they didn't match, and she muttered, "Hmm... wrong kimono. Here, try this one on instead, Deidara-san. It will match well enough with your hair and eyes, and the gloves..." She rifled through the pile of clothes, finally coming up with a beautiful turquoise kimono with a black sash.

"Whatever, yeah," He shrugged, trying to shake back his new, longer hair. He shrugged the kimono he had on off, and after a moment of delayed reaction, deadpanned, "...Oh."

"Deidara-san, was it that you forgot that you weren't wearing pants, forgot that as a female you hopefully cannot bear your chest that casually, or do you just *enjoy* messing up?" Konan sighed, rubbing her temples, while both Hinata and Sasori fell back in a dead faint out of embarrassment.

Surprisingly, they were on their way rather quickly. What took by far the longest amount of time in preparation was putting on suitable make-up. Konan had been called in, yet again, to take care of that. The Hyuuga didn't have enough practice to put on her own eye shadow, though she played the part of an aide in applying lipstick to the disguised men. Deidara definitely didn't feel comfortable as a woman, *especially* after the kimono fiasco, and make-up wasn't helping the matter.

He knew he kept squirming, but he couldn't help it. Most men weren't made to wear make-up. Luckily, it seemed that Itachi was having similar problems, though the Uchiha was trying hard not to, so all of the blame wasn't placed on the Iwa-nin.

After nearly getting stabbed in the eye with a brush and nearly stabbed in the gut with a kunai for not sitting still, Deidara had had enough of being female. Yet he had to do it for another *month*. (Though that was the maximum limit on the mission; if things went well, they could possibly be done within a week.)

He huffily crossed his arms, though his huff came out as more of a feminine sigh. Hidan snickered, having recovered from his nosebleed and subsequent fainting spell. Kakuzu and Kisame, neither of them having to do a single thing that put them out of their comfort zones, tapped their feet impatiently. They were waiting on two actual kunoichi; they were putting the finishing touches on their hair, or some other overly feminine reason none of the men cared to know about. He and Itachi just put their up messily, Deidara's in pigtails that even he had to admit looked rather nice, and Itachi in a half-bun which likewise suited him. It was somewhat awkward standing there, two faux females with three shinobi.

Finally, the two appeared and they were ready.

That was, they would be ready after the guys stopped gawking at them both. But that only demonstrated that they were following up the 'concubine look' quite nicely. The Hyuuga's dark hair

was held back in a loose braid, which fell down her back to nearly her waist, save for two bangs which were left out that framed her pale face. Her white eyes were accented by a thin ring of mascara and a light dusting of pale indigo eye shadow. What was probably the most likely cause for the gawking was that she had the lowest-cut top any of the men had ever seen her wearing, and if the stares were anything to go by, it was a refreshing change for them to see her in.

Konan had always been an attractive woman, it was obvious that most of the other members who hadn't met her that day knew. She was still wearing her usual rather heavy mascara and eye shadow, though the stud in her lower lip was conspicuously missing. Her hair wasn't in its usual messiness, but instead in a high bun, though admittedly just as messy as before. But as always, her ruffled hair gave her a casual elegance that was all too fitting for her profession as a kunoichi. Her white flower was still pinned to the side of her head, just above her ear, looking innocent.

"Shall we head off? The border to Amegakure is still about two days' journey away." She prompted with a faint smile.

The team departed into the trees around the hideout, leaping from branch to branch. Normal breakneck speed was an understatement, however; Deidara could handle it well enough, but the decorative kimono was getting annoying and was a burden. Worse, it seemed that after a mere hour of traveling, the Hyuuga kunoichi was starting to tire. With a guilty jolt, he realized that she hadn't had the same speed training as him, and she must have been running at full speed to even attempt to keep up with them that whole time. Several of the others noticed her slowing, glancing back with impatience or curiosity. Sasori rolled his eyes, and Deidara shot a glare in his direction.

He slowed down, wiping one of his plaits over his shoulder. Likewise the two nearest—Kisame and Itachi—also slowed down to see what was wrong. The woman-wannabe looked disappointed that the Hyuuga was merely running out of energy, though the blue-haired swordsman looked a little more sympathetic. "You doing alright, Bya-chan?" The blonde asked, almost surprising himself at his high voice. He'd have to get used to being a woman. It wouldn't look good to be surprised at his own body or voice in front of anyone else.

"I'm just... I'm fine...!" She said, panting for breath. It implied that she was quite the opposite, of course.

"Hey, guys, wait up, yeah!" Deidara called, and finally the rest of the members of their team slowed down to a better pace, albeit grumpily. He was about to suggest that he just give her a piggy-back ride, because though he probably couldn't carry her like that all day (he wasn't exactly known for his stamina or long-term strength), it would work for the moment. Unfortunately, though, he tripped at that moment on the bottom hem of his kimono.

His fall was arrested by a sharp yank on the waist. Looking back up, dangling above the forest floor by his obi, Deidara was irked to see that Sasori had grabbed the other end of the sash. "Be more careful, brat. Those outfits are expensive." He reprimanded, hauling him back up.

Itachi was smirking, and Kisame was flat-out grinning. "A bit hard to run in a kimono, eh? Does the lady need a hand?" The Kiri-nin asked with a snicker. Deidara kicked him in the shin.

"Well, obviously these are going to be a problem in travel." the Uchiha informed the group, since the other three came over to inspect the stop. Konan sighed wearily.

"We're risking enough as it is, traveling like shinobi. We can't afford to travel out of disguise." She admitted, folding her arms in front of her stomach. "Hmm..."

"Frankly I'm amazed that no one tripped sooner. Those things look uncomfortable and hazardous."

Kakuzu said primly, rolling his eyes. "Can't you just roll up the bottom or something?"

"I-I've tried already..." The Hyuuga said faintly, frowning. The taller shinobi just groaned in response. "U-Um... there's eight of us here... four are in kimonos..."

"I can travel well enough like this. I've had enough practice." Konan interjected with a sniff. "We have to figure out a way to travel, and get there within two days. The Rain Lord is expecting Sasori then. And that reminds me—we have aliases to go by."

Hidan rolled his eyes as well as his partner with a long-suffering groan. "Why did we wait until right *now* to do all this shit?" He complained, crossing his arms. None of the others could really answer him; it appeared that it had slipped their collective mind to do so. "So what're our names, oh great and noble leader?"

"If you actually *read* your scroll it gave you your fake name in it..." Sasori pointed out scathingly. Hidan gave him a one-fingered salute. "What we need to figure out is how to transport three kunoichi easily without slowing us down or arousing suspicion if we come across anyone. Konan-san couldn't carry anyone, as we can't afford to weigh her down in that kimono, regardless of how well she can manage on her own. Hidan is also out of the question, since he's the second slowest present and it would be a step backward to allow him to carry anyone. Kisame and Kakuzu both have the most raw strength, so each of them will have to carry someone."

The two tallest of the group grinned, obviously looking forward to the task. The three unfortunate enough to be wearing the kimonos without knowing how to travel in them winced, blushing lightly. This wasn't exactly going to be a fun experience.

"So, you're going to be carrying the last one, yeah? Danna, you're too short." Deidara teased, grinning. The redhead thought it less than amusing, of course.

The trio ended up having to be carried anyway, especially after Itachi tried to prove that he could walk and managed to do an awkward flip onto the nearest branch after tripping on the edge of his sash. The Hyuuga girl somehow wound up clinging to Kisame's back, and for some reason the Kiri-nin was feeling particularly sadistic and was taking the riskiest jumps possible. Every few moments there would be a shrill scream and a deep laugh—until one of the leaps didn't go quite as planned and they both wound up in a heap on the ground.

Itachi got off lucky, it seemed, being given a piggyback by Kakuzu. Until, of course, the elder's fellow immortal came up and demanded a race, gloating, "With that fag on your back and *your* speed, you wouldn't last ten seconds against me!" Kakuzu wasn't ever one to let Hidan win anything—even if it was just to torture them both.

Deidara was only lucky in the fact that he didn't get his life endangered. At least more than normal, at any rate. Sasori was stuck carrying him, and made it more than clear that the second they stopped he would be dropping the blonde. The Iwa-nin just ignored him, fiddling with the gloves covering his mouths and trying to ignore how uncomfortable it was to have his *Henge*-created breasts pressing up against his partner's back. He would never again attempt this jutsu, and he'd definitely be more considerate of all women in general in the future. Breasts, he decided, were *not* fun things to have.

The blonde decided, just to be annoying (and to take advantage of his temporary free ride before he was dumped in the body somewhere), to try to get some sleep. At least doze, and if anything else, see if the jutsu would dispel during relaxation. Deidara set his head on Sasori's shoulder, nuzzling into the crook of his neck and making a purring sound. "Brat..." The redhead muttered, and one would have to be deaf to miss the irritated tone.

"Get used to it, Sasori-danna. A whole month of this, yeah. Oh, only you get three other kunoichi hanging off of you at any given time." He snickered evilly. "You have to act *convincing*, yeah."

"I'm a shinobi; I know how to act. I'm more worried that *you'll* screw up and put the whole mission in jeopardy." Sasori retorted coolly, "You or that kunoichi friend of yours. The Hyuuga."

"Bya-chan..." It suddenly hit Deidara the monumental *strain* this must have been on her. No doubt that in Konohagakure she never had such a serious mission, or even a mission where it was 'succeed or die'. Not to mention the fact that she was an *actual* girl, so she'd be even more at risk than any of them (aside from Konan, granted). Plus she was just *so* shy and meek... "...she'll be fine, yeah..." He finished weakly, raising his feminine head off of his partner's shoulder to look at the dark-haired teen in question. She was laughing at something Kisame had said, looking positively dwarfed by the man's size, but the epitome of carefree nonetheless.

By the gods, what have I gotten her into...? Deidara thought, gasping softly.

Fortunately, his musings were cut short as the so-called epitome of carefree suddenly turned serious, calling out, "St-Stop!" Shinobi reflexes kicked in, much to the three passenger's problem. Kakuzu stopped in a second, and Itachi nearly somersaulted over him from the suddenly arrested momentum. The Hyuuga looked much more at ease, Byakugan blazing as she scanned the forest.

Deidara, on the other hand, was unceremoniously thrown forward by the sudden jar, and found himself hanging upside-down by the end of the obi again, this time having been saved by Konan. She merely smiled at him, hauling him back up onto the branch.

"There's a carriage..." The younger kunoichi informed them, pointing toward their left.

"Whoop-de-fucking-doo." Hidan growled, having lost his race with Kakuzu and in a sour mood. "What's that got to do with *us*? I think we can outrun a damn horse or two. Jashin-sama help us if we can't..."

"If you would *think*, Hidan, it would answer your question." Konan replied softly, folding her hands in her kimono's long sleeves. "What would look more appropriate for a visiting lord to arrive in, especially escorted by three of his concubines? On foot, or in a carriage?"

"She has a point." Kakuzu allowed, restraining his partner in a headlock. "So are we gonna hijack some poor bastard's carriage then?"

"It would be the logical thing to do. We'll lose time, though..." Itachi remarked boredly, straightening the obi around his narrow waist. His longer-than-normal hair was mussed up, though he looked more annoyed at the sash.

"Who's in the carriage, yeah?" Deidara asked curiously, looking around for said transportation. The road that it would be on was just below them, though the carriage itself was not yet in sight. They could barely hear the steady hoof beats of horses drawing closer, however.

"Um..." She focused her Byakugan, white eyes narrowing slightly. "Two women... and a ninja. L- Looks like a kunoichi... I would guess a jounin... maybe ANBU?" She guessed hesitantly. "Ah, it's an ANBU. I can't tell what village... but it's a hawk mask."

The Akatsuki members all glanced at each other for a brief moment. "...Hawk? That's an uncommon animal to wear." Itachi murmured, now working on straightening his hair.

"I think it's time the Akatsuki have another random, bloody attack." Kisame grinned viciously, his shark-like teeth glinting in the light. He and Kakuzu disappeared in a flicker, Hidan looking sorely

put out at being left behind.

"Fuckin' bastards, taking all the fun for themselves..." He growled under his breath, crossing his arms. The kunoichi beside him giggled nervously and edged away slowly.

A few moments later, there was the high, terrified whinny of several horses, and a long, drawn out scream. The Hyuuga hastily shut off her Byakugan, squeezing her eyes shut and obviously trying to block out the sounds of more shrieks. Deidara glanced around; neither of the other three looked particularly alarmed or distressed at the slaughter that was probably going on, and neither was he. Just went to show how desensitized high-ranking shinobi got to be. Finally the screams and neighs faded away in the forest's silence, and a pleased Kakuzu came underneath them, leading a team of three blood-splattered horses. Kisame followed behind them, examining his bloody sword intently.

"We lost one of the horses in the fight, but that was because of that ANBU bitch." The miser called up, undoubtedly smirking underneath his mask. "And you may want to give the entire thing a good bath to get off all of the blood."

Soon enough, they were on their way toward the border to the Rain. Traveling by carriage was frustrating because of its speed, but on the flipside it allowed them to catch a bit of sleep. Shinobi learn to rest whenever and wherever, and in whatever position they can manage. Hinata herself had been operating on about an hour of sleep, so the opportunity was welcomed with open arms. She was wedged between Itachi and Deidara, both of whom were looking less than pleased at their wider hips and sudden poses they couldn't sleep in. (The carriage had, unfortunately, been made for about two or three people. There were six inside, and although lodged rather tightly in, it was semi-comfortable. Kakuzu had *Henged* into a normal-looking merchant, and was playing the role of their driver. Kisame was merely laying on top of the roof.)

Unfortunately, the heiress was stuck in the middle. She didn't dare lean on Itachi's shoulder, and Deidara looked like he was having enough trouble adjusting to his new temporary body and trying to get a comfortable position without her intruding on his personal space. Every time she was about to nod off, her head slid forward, jerking her awake. She even tried leaning the back of her head on the wall behind her, but the bumps were hard enough without banging her head on them.

She fell into a sort of a doze, head leaning uncomfortably against her own shoulder, grateful enough for some decent sleep without complaining.

Red-eyed demons and monsters flitted at the edge of her dazed drowsing, daring her to fall into a deeper sleep. Even if she'd wanted to, Hinata was unable to. She just tried to concentrate on the bliss of some peaceful sleep and likewise tried to ignore the nightmarish visions. The Kyuubi was a definite figure in her dreams now that she had discovered Naruto's secret. And though she was still unsure of his role as a Jinchuuriki in her conscious hours, her unconscious freed her bias and fears upon the demon.

It seemed like only moments later when the carriage hit a bump—or something—and her head fell forward, yet again jarring her out of her doze. Hinata looked around, disoriented and somewhat confused at their stop. Itachi was sleeping soundly beside her, as was Deidara. It appeared that she was the only one awake, aside from Sasori, who was watching her with cool brown eyes.

"We're entering the Land of Rain." He answered her question before she could ask it.

"...Okay..." She stifled a yawn with her sleeve, glancing down in distaste at what sleeping in the kimono had done to the fabric. It was ruffled and wrinkled, and none of the others' outfits were in a much better state. But it would only attest to their time traveling; surely the Rain Lord wouldn't fault any of them for it...

"Hey! You blue-eyed bastard, *let us the fuck through*." Kakuzu's demand cut through the still air, and woke Konan as well. She took a cursory glance around at the other sleeping occupants, her eyes lingering a split second longer on the two *Henged* concubines.

"We'll want to let them sleep... the constant chakra drain will exhaust them easily." She whispered by way of explanation, rolling back her shoulders tiredly. "...What time is it...?"

"Twilight. Only a few more hours of travel time, unless we want to push the horses all night. It'll catch us up on lost time, but I'm not sure the animals could take it." Sasori replied. He said something else, whispering in the blunette's ear, but Hinata couldn't pick it up. She just shrugged it off, and tried to go back to sleep.

Again, she encountered the same problem as last time, lacking anything resembling a pillow. Finally she gave up, and in a half-asleep daze, let her head rest on the black-haired Akatsuki member beside her. This time, her rest was peaceful and uninterrupted.

The border guard was bored; no sane shinobi was stupid enough to try to infiltrate the Rain during the middle of *this* civil war. It went beyond bloody; towns and clans were massacred daily. The rain hadn't let up, either, discouraging the occasional tourist. No shinobi of any village would want to get in this war, and not only because of political reasons. He seriously doubted that ninja would try to infiltrate.

Just in case, of course, he gave the carriage in front of him a look-over. The horses were of the highest quality, though all three looked rather tired. Their driver was a bad-mouthed, explosive-tempered, average-looking man, though the man's bright green eyes had such a look of killer intent that he had to wonder if he *was* a shinobi. After a second glance, however, he decided just to chalk it up to a bad day.

The carriage itself screamed 'rich owner'. What appeared to be real gold on the spokes of the wheels, as well as a few jewels and precious stones inlaid decoratively in the wood. The guard opened the door, checking the interior. Two of its occupants stared flatly back at him; an attractive blue-haired woman, dressed quite revealingly and provocatively and the man beside her, obviously the owner of the carriage—and probably her. Four other people were crammed into the small carriage, all asleep. Three more pretty girls, all dressed in low-slung, silky kimonos with various jewelry, make-up, and long sleeves, and then a bare-chested man that might've been a bodyguard or an aide. The beaded necklace around his neck was curious-looking, but for fear of being rude or incurring the man's wrath, didn't look at it further. The rich man's flat glare forced his curiosity to flee.

"Everything checks out." The border guard said as he closed the door, quietly as to not wake up any of the women. The driver nodded irritably, still glaring daggers at him. "You may proceed."

The three horses started forward in a trot, and the carriage rolled off. Their hooves splashed in the muddy puddles on the road, and soon they disappeared into the darkening rain.

The man had no idea what he had just let into his country.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh snap on a stick. A mission like this? If the Leader was so apprehensive about it, sending so many members, maybe there is more than meets the eye to this mission...But more importantly, how will Bya-chan react to having so many 'females' with her on this trip?

The Mission Begins

Chapter Notes

Quick Clarification (because I didn't want to just list it in the story):

Sasori's alias is Himura Daisya. (surname means 'scarlet village' and first name was taken from the character of the same name; last name taken for obvious reasons and first name taken for a tribute)

Hidan's alias is Wakahisa Masao. (surname means 'forever young' and first name means 'religious or holy'; names taken for obvious reasons)

Deidara's alias is Yamamoto Ishiko. (surname means 'base of the mountain' and first name means 'child of stone'; names taken for obvious reasons)

Konan's alias is Koizumi Kaoru. (surname means 'little spring' and first name means 'fragrance'; names taken in reference to her flower)

Hinata's alias is Tsukino Haya. (surname means 'moon field' and first name means 'quick or light'; last name taken for the color of her eyes and first name taken for her Juuken fighting style)

Itachi's alias is Akikawa Akane. (surname means 'autumn river' and first name means 'deep red'; last name taken for his murder of Shisui in the river and first name taken for obvious reasons)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The rest of the journey was rather uneventful.

Except for the all-out free-for-all bloodbath/brawl between Akatsuki members.

That could've counted as an event.

It had started innocently enough, though unfortunately enough it started with the Konoha kunoichi. She was awake before most of the others, it seemed, and she didn't seem to be feeling well—or in a particularly good mood. She was holding her stomach, bent over and resting her cheek on her knee; not a good sign. Of course Deidara jumped to her side immediately, worried and half suspicious of one of the other members—predominantly Sasori—poisoning her.

Itachi had stayed innocently quiet, only regarding her with an unreadable expression.

When asked what was the matter, Deidara nearly had his head ripped off for his trouble.

"*Nothing* is the matter! Everything is just so *peachy*! I'm fine! Why can't you lay off and leave me alone, Deidara?!" She cried exasperatedly, her white eyes glaring daggers at the unfortunate bystander. He was shocked, of course, and more than a little hurt at the hostile reaction.

"Feh, kunoichi..." Sasori hissed under his breath, crossing his arms.

"Hey! I was just asking her a question, yeah!" Deidara shot back at him. Konan likewise smacked the redhead in the arm, though for what exactly, he had no idea.

"I-I don't need your sympathy!" The Hyuuga added with nothing short of a snarl. At that point, Hidan had to get in on the argument, and the whole thing went to hell.

"What's wrong with the bitch?"

"Call me a bitch one more time I dare you, Hidan."

"...Woah." No one had ever really talked back to him before, aside from Kakuzu, and it threw him off guard for a moment. Especially since it was the previously shy, meek girl.

Sasori had sighed loudly then, muttering, *"This is why I don't like kunoichi. Unpredictable, unstable, emotional, and you can track them by scent alone one week out of four..."*

"Sasori, I would castrate you if I could. Your sensitivity never ceased to amaze me." Konan replied, her voice icy. "Either kindly shut your mouth or show a bit of support." The blunette stood up, taking a moment to balance herself in the moving carriage, and hesitantly placed a hand on the younger's shoulder. She just gave a small whimper in response, still holding her stomach. "Itachi-san, please inform Kakuzu that we need to stop for a short break."

Deidara was entirely nonplussed by the situation, but by the time Kakuzu finally managed to stop in a secluded spot, Sasori and Itachi were both forcibly restraining Hidan and the Hyuuga was screaming at him at the top of her lungs. The blonde was more than a bit frightened, wondering if she had finally snapped and let loose all of her pent-up aggressions.

"...Bya-chan? You okay, yeah?" He hesitantly put an arm around her shoulders. It was the *wrong* thing to do at the time. She shifted and punched him hard enough to disrupt his jutsu and dispel it—not to mention hard enough to leave a fair-sized bruise. The blonde swore and put his hands up to his cheek, feeling seriously betrayed and definitely confused. Needless to say, he stayed as far as possible from her, hastily scrambling to the far side of the carriage, half-hiding behind Hidan and Itachi.

"You try that again and I'll personally slit your throat." Sasori threatened, making the mistake of letting the immortal go. "You aren't going to go around attacking members of this team—"

"I am part of this team, too, Sasori! Just because you hate me doesn't mean you can't use my Byakugan!" She shouted hoarsely, Konan having to restrain her now.

Unfortunately, Hidan shoved the disguised Uchiha and surprised Iwa-nin away, leaping across the carriage with a yelp of, *"Now you're gonna fuckin' pay for assaulting a goddamn Akatsuki member, bitch!"* She brought her leg up to connect with his stomach before he could attack, but he just grabbed her leg and pulled her across toward him.

There were several shouts and yells, and finally the pair were pulled apart again. The Hyuuga had a bloody lip and was rubbing her leg tenderly, whereas the Jashinist was clutching his chest, gasping out, "She—Jashin-sama, she... stopped my heart... or some shit like that..."

Kakuzu idly opened the door then, looking both curious—and if possible, scared. Kisame peeked in as well, sporting a similar expression.

Konan sniffed primly and led the shaken girl out of the carriage, turning back to give the men a glare that very clearly stated *'follow us and you'll pay the price'*.

Deidara gaped blankly at the retreating women, his hand still pressed up against his cheek. Sasori draped an arm over his shoulder, grinning flatly. *"And you're the one who invited her into the group..."*

The blonde just turned and spat a mouthful of blood at him. "Asshole. I hate you, yeah." The Suna-nin smiled as he wiped the blood off of his cheek, auburn eyes smug.

-.-.-

Hinata was miserable. Not only had she started her period several days ago—thank the gods it was nearing its end—but the usual kunoichi jutsu that she used to control her cramps and mood swings had for some reason backfired on her. And now, of course, she was too distracted and emotional to even attempt to reinstate the jutsu. She hurt and she felt hostile, though now guilt was starting to seep into her anger's cracks. No doubt after her 'anger fit', as Hanabi would call it, she would get a horrible case of the 'sad fit'.

She followed Konan mutely away from the carriage, and away from the sounds of Hidan's colorful reenactment of the scene. The sparse trees above them did little to nothing to keep the rain off them, and soon enough they were both soaked. The Land of Rain was aptly named.

"Hinata." The blunette's voice made her jump; the quiet, soothing rhythm of the rain had caused her to space out a bit.

"I'm... sorry." She admitted, almost wishing she didn't have to let go of her anger quite yet. But the sadness and guilt was creeping in. It'd be so much easier to take this reprimanding when she was mad, anyway. "I don't know why the jutsu failed."

"There are only three points I want to discuss with you right now, Hinata-san." Konan said in a flat tone, ignoring the younger's words. "The first would be that you need to get yourself under control by the end of the day. Tonight we'll probably be in the Rain Lord's mansion. You cannot be emotionally unstable at that time, nor can you go around disrupting either Deidara-san or Itachi-san's disguise jutsus or stopping hearts."

Hinata bowed her head, not all of the traces of her rage quite gone yet. Truth was, she was feeling rather insolent. She didn't ask to be put on this mission, nor was she particularly looking forward to any aspect of it. She seriously doubted she could spend a month with Sasori—and Hidan—without getting herself killed by either of them. The Hyuuga knew she wasn't really liked within the organization. Even her and Deidara were drifting apart, and she had even just *hit* him...

"The second point that I would like to bring up with you," The woman interrupted her thoughts by continuing, "Is that I *know* this is stressful for you. You must have a lot of problems considering your circumstances, and while it is probably a good idea to take out some of that aggression sometimes, targeting members of the Akatsuki is *not* the way to go about it. For security reasons and simplicity's sake, Sasori *is* the captain of this mission, and it would be wise not to annoy him too much. And Hidan isn't ever one to mess with."

The warning didn't have any warmth in it. It was no doubt delivered with the sake of the mission in mind, not the heiress' own welfare. Hinata didn't really mind, either. She was a kunoichi. The mission came first.

"And finally... be careful of what you do to Deidara-san. He doesn't quite know how to handle women, and I believe he thinks you're much more fragile than you really are. He relies on you. You can't hit him every time you have your period, Hinata-san." Konan smiled wryly, and Hinata resisted the temptation to giggle hesitantly.

"I-I'll apologize..." Her moods were lifted, though she didn't exactly know why. The anger was completely gone, and was replaced by a sort of melancholic happiness. She would have to

apologize to all of them if she wished to stay alive, though she seriously doubted Deidara would understand that she just had some cramps and a bad case of PMS.

"Oh... and if you want to watch something interesting..." She reached up to adjust the white flower in her hair, smiling mysteriously, "Watch how the members interact with each other. You may learn a thing or two about being a good kunoichi."

-.-.-

The Rain Lord's house couldn't even be described as a house. Or a mansion, even. It was more like... a fortified, castle-like, richly embellished *thing* from fairytales. Kisame and Kakuzu had long since disappeared, leaving Hidan to drive the carriage into the clearing surrounding the castle-like thing. The silver-haired immortal had grumbled loudly at his 'job', though looked overjoyed at getting to describe the building they'd be staying in for the next month colorfully and enthusiastically.

"*Shit*, guys! This thing is fuckin' *huge*! There's all these towers and shit and the gate is made of *gold*! Real damn gold, I think! Kakuzu would piss himself!"

"*Masao-san*," Sasori called irritably out the window, carefully using the immortal's assumed name, "Keep the language to a minimum. We wouldn't want to offend anybody."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, Sasori." Hidan rolled his eyes, giving him a dismissive wave of the hand. The use of the puppeteer's real name caused an uproar, mostly because they were already on the Lord's grounds. It took awhile, but finally everyone called down and the Jashinist agreed to go by the aliases from now on. In fact, it took until one of the Lord's messengers came out to greet them for them all to calm down. The second the brown-haired man greeted Hidan, everyone immediately snapped into their projected roles. It was quite the startling change, but it went flawlessly nonetheless.

Deidara giggled girlishly, having reinstated his *Oiroke no jutsu* since earlier. He held up a hand to his mouth, batting his eyes (or at least the visible one, unfortunately his scope had to be left behind; no visible or recognizable weapons or suspicious objects were allowed with them) at the messenger when he opened the door to let them out. Konan even had her arms around Sasori's neck, looking for all the world like she had just been caught doing something dirty, though just a moment earlier she was swearing at the redhead venomously.

"Ah! Himura-sama, I humbly welcome you on behalf of my lord, Oshiro-sama." The man bowed deeply as Sasori stood up, looking down boredly at him.

Good thing lords are supposed to be snobby, Deidara thought sourly, though on the outside he was all grins and giggles. He reached down to tighten the charcoal-colored obi around his waist, delicately stepping down onto the grass. His feet were bare, and the damp grass felt good on his toes.

The Hyuuga girl tripped on her way out of the carriage, conveniently falling forward to hang off of Sasori's shoulder. "Oh..." She said breathily, though the move was obviously planned, "*So* sorry, Daisya-sama..." The redhead took it in stride, just grinning wolfishly as he wrapped an arm around her waist. Deidara felt an odd stab of jealousy, though it was mostly overpowered by his pride in the Konoha kunoichi. Her acting skills thus far were rather good, considering how meek she was

otherwise.

"Let's go inside this luxurious castle and meet Oshiro-sama, eh, Haya-chan?" Sasori asked lightly, gesturing to the messenger who'd greeted them. "May we intrude on your lord's graces?"

The brunette man bowed again, "Yes, Himura-sama. This way, please. I'll show you to your rooms where you will be spending your time with us and give you a tour of Oshiro-sama's home."

If it were even possible, the place was even more extravagant on the inside. Rich wall tapestries and sculpture decorated the hall where they entered, and Deidara recognized several pieces as very famous, very expensive pieces of art. Oh, if he only had his clay with him...

A live peacock strutted by them, a loose, jeweled collar around its neck. Its long, emerald green feathers trailed limply on the carpet behind it; obviously the bird didn't seem threatened by any of them. Which was just as well, since they didn't need suspicion when they hadn't been there an hour. What appeared to be a tiger kitten eagerly followed the peacock, batting playfully at its feathers and feet. The Hyuuga kunoichi was very obviously trying to resist cooing.

Everything was embellished in rich colors, gold, jewels, anything that stank of wealth. Itachi looked rather bored with the whole proceeding, though whenever the messenger glanced at him he immediately changed his expression into one of sheer awe. It was a bit unnerving as someone so emotionless could so easily pull off different expressions flawlessly. Deidara chalked it up to being a shinobi.

"This is where you and your—" the makeshift tour guide paused only momentarily, but Sasori visibly narrowed his eyes in that second, "Girls will be staying. This is... your aide?" The brown-haired man looked curiously at Hidan, glancing down to the rosary still around his neck. Deidara groaned mentally; the man was still allowed to wear *that* but he couldn't bring some clay?

"*Bodyguard*, you ignorant hea—" Sasori cut him off with a glare.

"He is my bodyguard. You can't be too careful these days..." The redhead said instead, tone indifferent. "When may we meet with Oshiro-sama...?" His flat voice changed into that of impatience. Not only was he probably honestly impatient with the whole proceeding, but it *was* rather rude—and suspicious—that the Rain Lord himself didn't come out to meet them.

"Ah, he's... not here at the moment. You weren't expected until tomorrow morning, Himura-sama." The messenger bowed deeply, his face heating up in embarrassment. Konan stiffened slightly from beside Deidara, and he instinctively edged away from her. "Oshiro-sama will be back late tonight. In just a few hours, I swear, Himura-sama. If you were to arrive, I was given orders to make you comfortable and let you rest after your journey."

None of them had taken into account that the target wouldn't be there. But if he really was coming back... it would give them valuable time to explore the palace and map out the place. The whole team subconsciously knew this without exchanging a word or any looks.

"...I see." Sasori said slowly, glancing around him boredly. He faked a yawn, though whether or not their guide could tell was beyond them. "In that case, I think I may retire early. The trip *was* rather... trying. Please inform Oshiro-sama of my arrival, but do not trouble him to come meet me tonight. I'm sure wherever he's been it's been tiring for him as well. We can conduct our affairs in the morning just as well."

The brunette messenger nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, Himura-sama! Just call one of the servants if you need anything—anything at all."

Sasori just shrugged and turned on his heel, the rest of the team following in his wake like good little subordinates. All of them were silent until they reached the large, ornate doors that signified the entrance to the room given to them for their stay. Deidara was biting his lip in attempt not to say something, and likewise several others of the ninja beside him were shifting restlessly.

The second the doors closed behind them and the Hyuuga gave a quick once-over of the room and nodded, they finally relaxed.

"Fucking *Jashin*. This mission is seriously *stupid*. I don't even know why I had to come on this shitty thing." Hidan groaned, flopping onto the only bed. Sasori pushed him off roughly, scowling.

"The *Lord* gets the bed, moron. The bodyguard gets to stay up all night and guard said Lord and his concubines." The redhead growled, perching himself on the edge of the bed. He pulled off the hood-like hat he was forced to wear, running a hand through his hair. "We will still refer to each other by our aliases, even in private company. Try to act as in character as possible at all times. And remember—if you're caught in a compromising situation, *change the compromise*. Fan out and see what you can find. Myself, Masao and Ishiko will stay here. Haya, Akane, split up and *do not* get caught. I want this whole place mapped out. Kaoru, try to find those scrolls we need."

Konan didn't say anything about getting ordered around. She just bowed slightly, murmuring, "Yes, Daisya-sama." She made a hand sign, and in what appeared to be a flurry of *papers*, she disappeared. Itachi sighed minutely, flipping back a lock of his long hair over his shoulder. His dark eyes melted into scarlet, and a split second later, he was gone as well.

The Hyuuga kunoichi bobbed her head once, glancing at Deidara before using a *Shunshin* to likewise flicker out of the scene.

"She's going to get caught." Hidan stated dryly, fingering his necklace. "Was that really such a wise move?"

"I recall that she was a good enough kunoichi to rupture your heart without giving you a single scratch." Sasori retorted primly. "I think she'll suffice for a few simple-minded civilians."

"Wow, danna's showing a bit of faith in Bya-chan." Deidara snickered, hiding his mouth behind a gloved hand. He *hated* those gloves already, though he knew that he'd have to get used to it. The kimono itself, however, he sort of liked. The sleeves, anyway; they were loose and hung off his shoulders, and the silk was actually quite comfortable. Not that he'd admit it to anyone out loud, of course. It was bad enough he had to use this jutsu and cross-dress.

"I'm going to *have* to, aren't I?" The puppet user rolled his eyes, then stood up off of the bed. "And the reason I wanted you two to stay behind—drop it. Drop it all." The two shinobi gave him a quizzical look. "Look, I know you both smuggled weapons and gods-know-what-else into this mission. Get rid of *all* of it, *now*."

"I didn't—" Both of them started in unison, then glanced at each other guiltily.

"*Now*." Sasori repeated, shaking his head in exasperation.

The strangest thing was that Deidara *actually* felt an inkling of guilt for taking along some... precautions. He hesitantly untied the obi around his waist, giving it a good shake. Several kunai, shuriken, senbon, and other assorted weapons fell out with a muffled thump onto the carpet. The other two looked at the pile with blatant 'how-the-hell-did-he-fit-all-that-in-there' expressions. The blonde's guilt was quickly thrown away with a bit of shinobi pride; he had smuggled that in and *more*.

Deidara retied the sash, and hiked up the bottom hem of the kimono. He unstrapped the garter around his thigh, tossing another pack of kunai onto the floor. He then bent down, after readjusting his kimono, and took the bells off of his anklets. The bells were miniscule, but nonetheless he'd managed to hide several soldier pills in each, and emptied them into his hands. Then the mouths on his palms spat out the clay they'd been holding for the past two days; bringing any clay in any other form would've been too risky and Sasori would've dug it up immediately. Three birds, one spider, one scorpion and a miniature dragon later, the Iwa-nin was still emptying out various other pockets and places he'd managed to cram full of weapons.

The heap of weapons grew slowly larger at their feet. Hidan looked sorely jealous, whereas Sasori appeared to have gone beyond shocked into a sort of blank-looking denial. Finally, withdrawing one last pair of kunai strapped to his forearm, Deidara tossed it into the pile and perched on the bed. "Happy now, Daisya-danna?" He asked sourly, still unhappy at being caught.

"...Ishiko... *next time just follow the damn orders.*" The redhead groaned, gesturing to the pile of weaponry. He reached back and produced a scroll out of *nowhere* (Deidara blanched and immediately tried to see exactly where), unfurling it. In a silent puff of smoke, the lifeless form of his favorite puppet, Hiruko, sat on the carpet. Sasori sighed again and started heaping kunai and shuriken into the puppet's open back, cramming it down in there. He turned and glared at Hidan, commanding, "You, next."

Deidara snickered from his spot on the bed; the man had much less room to hide stuff. Unlike a kimono, which offered plenty of room, the immortal was just wearing a fairly tight pair of pants and a loose jacket. The jacket wouldn't offer much room.

Unfortunately, the Jashinist appeared to be just as ingenious as the temporary concubine. He removed the necklace around his neck, smirking in their direction. With a single seal and a whole lot of nin-smoke, it appeared that every single *bead* on the rosary had been a *Henge* to hide something—including his scythe. The symbol itself reverted back into the real necklace, and he put that back around his neck with a laugh. "Looks like you underestimated the newbies, eh, Sasori?"

Said art-nin just smacked his palm against his forehead. "First, it's *Daisya* during the mission. Second, you two are going to get us all killed one day, you ignorant brats." The pair just grinned proudly up at him.

-.-.-

Hinata wandered around the hallways boredly, almost lost. She had no idea what exactly she was supposed to be looking for, so she just stuck to memorizing key points and what looked to be important rooms. The tiger kitten came and followed her for a short while, but departed, leaving her on her own once more.

Her Byakugan was active, and the steady chakra movement and expenditure was only making her cramps worse. Every few steps she'd sort of jerk forward, half-tempted to double over and just wait the pain out, but her shinobi training reacting faster than her conscious mind and keeping her upright. Not to mention the fact that it was incredibly warm in this wing of the palace. Her kimono was heavy, but she had rolled up the sleeves and then the bottom hem to mid-thigh, and still she was sweating heavily. She knew her face was probably flushed as well, and glancing at her own body, her heart didn't look too well.

Still, the kunoichi moved on, mapping out as much as she could. She pinned her braid up on the top of her head to keep it off her neck and back, but it was only a moment's reprieve. She kept walking, glancing around into empty rooms and corridors. There was absolutely *nothing* down here, but it wouldn't hurt to check. In fact, it was probably better that she checked, just in case.

Moving on, Hinata paused when she spotted three people in one of the rooms. She stealthily crept over, focusing her Byakugan on them. They were all women, and non-shinobi at that. *Probably more concubines*, she thought wryly, pressing up against the thin wall to hear.

"—seen the new Lord? He's really handsome, and Oshiro-sama is going to make a treaty with his country. But he brought his own girls with him." One of the voices informed the others primly.

"Such a pity! I really wouldn't mind seeing some other man besides Oshiro-sama..." A second voice lamented, and one of the figures hung her head. "Have you seen the girls he brought with him?"

"I haven't, yet, but I bet we'll see them soon enough." The first voice said, giggling lightly. "I feel sorry for them when the heat gets them. They'll be shedding those beautiful kimonos of theirs real fast."

So that was what was up with the heat! she discovered, frowning. It was petty and perverted, not to mention rather stupid, but sometimes simplistic routes were the easiest to follow. At this point it was more of an annoyance than anything, though.

"Have you noticed how weird it was that Oshiro-sama left when he was expecting such important guests?" The final voice, much higher and younger than the other two, piped up. Hinata's eyes widened slightly, and she pressed her ear up against the wall a bit better. This was the type of information she was supposed to be getting.

"Yes, I heard that he was paranoid that they would be shinobi." The first voice, apparently the leader, replied. One of the women inside stood up and did something to her hair. "Everyone was supposed to check them out to make sure that they weren't. And trust me, I heard it from Ikki-san—they *aren't* shinobi."

The Hyuuga took 'Ikki' to be the guard that greeted them upon their arrival. And while it was good that they managed to fool everyone so far, it was most certainly *not* good that there was already suspicion surrounding their group. Sasori would have to know of that.

The women inside fell into more idle gossip, so Hinata decided that they weren't going to say anything more that was even remotely valuable. She crept quietly back along the hallway, retreating back towards her assigned room. It was safer there, at least. As she disappeared around the corner, she failed to notice one of the women from inside peek her head out of the room's door, looking around curiously with glittering green eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Ooh, I wonder who had the green eyes? Looks a bit suspicious, eh?
Then again, the whole mission thus far seems sort of...fishy...Can they manage to get through it with the Leader's threat hanging over their heads?

Quick Thanks: I'd just like to give a quick thanks and shout out to my two wonderful

and amazing betas, IcePrincessWinter and Centurious The Azure. Thanks for putting up with me and inspiring me with your youth and kindness! Yosh!

And, as always, much love to the people who spend their time reading this story.

Revenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Oshiro Yutaka was a man of rich tastes. In fact, his mansion looked downright *destitute* compared to his actual self. The man reeked of wealth. (In fact, it was a bit cloying, really.) Hinata was somewhat used to riches, but her clan's taste was more subdued and sophisticated—nothing at all like the blatant extravagance she saw here. None of the other team members really looked impressed by it, either. In private company, anyway. In public, they all played their roles well.

The Rain Lord gave them all a grand speech welcoming them into his home, inviting them to partake in his feasts and any indulgences they might want, to relax. Sasori took it all in stride, saying just the right things to seem grateful but still indifferent to the whole affair. The kunoichi all just greeted Yutaka politely, bowing low to show off generous amounts of cleavage. Otherwise, they were practically stuck in their room, as only Sasori, being the 'Lord' and Hidan, playing the part of his bodyguard, were allowed into the political meetings.

Hinata was actually rather *bored* with the whole mission. They'd already been there a few days, and nothing had happened, nor had they done anything to raise the smallest amount of suspicion. In fact, she was sort of enjoying many of the perks of being a guest in the Lord's home, especially now that her period was finally over and her horrid cramps had left her.

She had even been getting enough sleep lately. All of them confined to a single room, they'd decided to just throw a few blankets on the floor and sleep where they wanted. It almost looked like a massive slumber party thrown by some young girl. The bed, funnily enough, usually stayed empty.

"He still doesn't trust us." Sasori murmured, sitting on the mattress with his chin in his hands. "He's civil and listens to all of the political bullshit I give him, but he doesn't trust any of us. Not even the girls—though he's taken a liking to all of you."

"It's not our mission to gain trust." Konan replied simply sitting on the floor in front of him. Hinata was sitting in front of her, letting the older woman undo the long braid for her. The braid was rather uncomfortable to sleep with.

"We need a certain level of trust to allow the assassination. Plus we still don't know the location of one of the scrolls..." The blunette didn't reply to that.

The Hyuuga sighed pleasantly, shaking her head and freeing the rest of the hair. She thanked Konan, and stood up, rubbing her arms. After discovering the heating problems of the palace, Itachi had placed a temperature jutsu on the room. Now it was actually semi chilly. The pair continued talking in low tones about the mission. Hinata didn't particularly care; she'd be told what she needed to do, and it wasn't her job to intrude on the conversation of higher-ups. She padded over toward Deidara, who was attempting to brush his longer-than-normal hair while it was still in the pigtails.

"I'm fucking *bored*. There's nothing to do in this place." Hidan announced, but no one paid him much heed. He'd been complaining daily for the past few days, and the rest of them surmised that it was because he hadn't had his bloodbath he wanted.

"Entertain yourself, yeah." Deidara muttered, yanking at a knot in his blonde hair. Hinata smiled

and took the brush from him, combing it out for him. "...Though this place *is* rather boring. Can't we just kill everyone and then turn the place upside down for the last scroll, yeah?"

"*No.*" Sasori and Konan snapped in unison. The kunoichi continued, "The Land of Rain is very carefully balanced right now. When we kill the Lord, we will have to run *very quickly* and *very quietly*, and even then we stand a high chance of getting caught. We have to do this delicately and silently."

"Fine, fine, no need to bite my head off..." He muttered under his breath with a huff. The Konoha kunoichi smiled to herself at how... *friendly* they were towards each other. No, not like friends, or even comrades, but more like a family. They didn't get along and they wanted to kill each other, but they were related by one way or another and they could depend on each other. She nodded mentally, deciding that they were, indeed, like one big happy family.

"Hey, I got an idea to entertain ourselves." Hidan suddenly stood up, wiping off his hands where he had been drawing in his blood. The fuchsia-eyed immortal grinned viciously, and instantly most of the others were on their guard.

"...And what is your idea...?" Itachi asked carefully, his black eyes flashing red. "Please keep in mind that we can't do anything outside of this room and our sealing jutsus won't block out all of the sound."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. No, it's just something for fun. Y'all are supposed to be acting like whores, right?" He dismissed the warning with a wave of his hand, sniggering at his no-doubt evil scheme.

"Not for *your* benefit, Hidan-san." Konan said scathingly, her eyes icy. "It is an act and you know it, you perverted ass."

"Call it practice, then." He shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm just saying we hold a, uh, 'sexy contest'." Deidara suddenly laughed, but managed to hide it with a cough.

"What the hell would that entail?" Itachi asked coldly. His eyes were a definite scarlet now, and Hinata winced inwardly at the sight.

"You all just, like, pose or some shit like that. First one to get a nosebleed out of the judge wins. It'll help it be more convincing for Oshiro-whoever-the-fuck-he-is." Hidan explained, while Deidara tried to hold in his giggles.

"*You* got a nosebleed from the initial demonstration of the *Oiroke* jutsu." Sasori pointed out, proving that he was listening to the crackpot idea as well.

Hinata sighed, wondering just how far the idea would go before they realized the stupidity of it. *Then again... they are men*, she thought ruefully.

"Did I say *I* would be the judge? Hell no!" Hidan strutted over and looped an arm around Sasori's shoulders with a grin. "*You*, you redheaded prude, are going to be the judge. You're supposed to be the lecherous old fart in charge of them all, right? You need to *act* like it! Enjoy the view!"

Luckily, Hidan's idea was cut off when Konan threw the nearest object—one of the stray kunai someone had left behind—at his head. After he finally dislodged it from his neck (with much swearing), the masochist pocketed the blade and, placing a hand over his throat to stem the bleeding, turned on her. "Now what the *shittin' fuck* was that for?!"

"Maybe because you're being an idiot, Hidan-san?" She responded innocently, though the smile ruined it.

"I'm just trying to entertain us. Sasori ain't getting anywhere on his part of the mission, and we can't do much more unless one of you transvestites or whores wanna offer yourself up as bait. This could be practice for the mission." He snarled, though sadly he was starting to make sense. In a roundabout, perverted way.

"There are easier ways of doing so." Konan shook her head in disbelief.

Sasori, though, interjected. "Hidan, if it will shut you up, I'll agree to this idea. Even though it is a futile effort on your part."

The immortal looked overjoyed.

But then the redheaded Suna-nin shot him down with a smirk, saying, "Good luck getting anyone to participate, of course."

Hinata sighed in relief; Sasori had managed to get Hidan in a loophole and simultaneously halted the idea. She was amazed at the man's ingenuity sometimes.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Hidan would not be put down. "Fine, but you asked for it." He whirled around on three of the girls, Itachi, Deidara and Hinata. "Don't *any* of you want revenge on that redheaded bastard?"

With those simple words, their night went downhill. Quickly and violently.

-.-.-

Evidently Sasori had wronged everyone there. Or possibly they were being sadistic. Deidara didn't know, but what he did know was that now he could pay his partner back for all of that hellish training he'd been put through. "Come *on*, Bya-chan! Aren't you mad at him for all of those nasty things he's said to you?"

The Hyuuga girl looked unmoved on the subject. "I-I'm not going to degrade myself because of some petty revenge..."

Konan smiled faintly, asking softly, "Not even revenge on all of those sexist comments he made the other day? Not even revenge on separating Deidara-san and you? Not even for treating you like dirt, Hinata-san?"

And with that, everyone was on board. Sasori was looking ready to kill, sitting on the edge of the bed with his arms crossed. "I'll be fair and throw it out there that it is physically *impossible* for me to get a nosebleed, whether by perverse thoughts or bodily harm."

"Even if that isn't a load of bullshit—which it's not!—you won't be able to survive long." Hidan cackled, sitting in line as well. "Just try to concentrate on anything with those 'perverse thoughts' of yours, fucker."

Deidara snickered evilly. He was going to *enjoy* this if it killed him and any of his remaining manly pride. Being stuck in a woman's body for a week pretty much sapped any of that, as well as any shame he might've had.

First up was Hidan, ironically enough. Most of them were curious—even if it was a morbid and

possibly masochistic curiosity—to see what he could pull. He just took a deep breath as he stood up, forming a pair of hand signs. Some very familiar hand signs. "*Oiroke no jutsu!*" Evidently being a genius meant you could copy a jutsu after only seeing it three times.

Sasori remained impassive as the smoke cleared. Hidan's version of it appeared to be much bustier than either Deidara or Itachi's, for which the blonde was equally thankful and jealous. But unlike them, the naked woman didn't appear shamed or embarrassed in the least at her lack of clothes. In fact, the now-female Hidan just leaned forward with a coy smile, winking. The redhead didn't seem amused.

The jutsu dispelled in another puff of smoke, leaving an irate Hidan. "Well fuck!" He exclaimed, but didn't offer anything else. Deidara snorted; the man had probably purposely failed at his attempt just to see the other contestants of this inane game. "So let's move on, shall we? Itachi, you're up!"

"Masao, for the last time, *use the fake names*." Konan sighed irritably, massaging her temples. The Uchiha stood up silently, ignoring the summon. He stepped delicately over toward the blanket they'd deemed as the 'arena', the bangles on his wrists and ankles jingling.

His eyes were closed and he appeared to be completely at ease. But when he reopened them, they were scarlet, the Sharingan rotating slightly. "*Tsukuyomi...*" He murmured, and beside Deidara, the Hyuuga flinched visibly.

Sasori sat rigidly on the bed, unmoving for the sparse few seconds. Everyone else's minds were churning with what kind of things Itachi could do with that genjutsu (*any physical sensation for seventy two hours straight*, the Iwa-nin noted), watching with bated breaths. The mere moment it took for the genjutsu to take hold passed, and the redhead just gave a small twitch. Itachi scowled, possibly one of the most emotional expressions he'd ever worn.

"That... won't work on me, Akane." Sasori said levelly, though his shoulders were shaking slightly. "Genjutsu like that won't have its full effect on my body."

"...Indeed." The stoic Konoha-nin muttered, turning on his heel. He obviously wasn't pleased with his trial's failure. Itachi sat down by Hidan, who edged away from him nervously. Everyone glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes, wondering *what* he had managed to create that hadn't worked on Sasori. But in his current mood, no one dared ask.

"This is stupid." Sasori complained, composing himself once more. "None of you are going to win this idiotic crusade and it's hardly 'practice'. Akane couldn't use his *Tsukuyomi* anyway, and Masao... I don't want to comment on his entry. Can we stop it?"

A chorus of "no!" rang all around, meeting his proposal.

"You're all sadistic and perverted." He hung his head, looking boredly at the next contestant—Konan.

She primly stood up, dusting off imaginary dirt off of the back of her kimono. The azure-haired woman stepped over toward him, sitting on the bed next to him. Hidan immediately started up, shouting, "Hey! Stay on the damn arena—no physical touching!" but he was quickly silenced.

"I do not plan on touching Daisya-san. I just want to say a few things to him." She replied politely, holding up her hands in a clear 'hands off' gesture.

"Whatever." The artist muttered in resignation. Hidan looked mutinous but stayed likewise quiet.

She wrapped an arm gently around his shoulders, her fingertips just barely hovering above his shoulder. Her light eyes glanced back to make sure that Hidan saw that there was no physical contact. Then she leaned forward and whispered something in his ear, almost in a purr. Sasori kept his bored stare directly ahead unwaveringly. Konan kept her voice low enough for none of the others to hear, try as they might. Deidara briefly considered getting up to see if that would help, but eventually decided against it. He shifted, though, straining to hear, and for a moment the redhead's flat stare flickered toward him.

The woman continued her no doubt suggestive whispering, her hands reaching around to almost stroke his cheek. Her head was angled so that none of them could read her lips, either, which of course only infuriated the would-be spectators further.

"Are you almost *done*, yeah?" The blonde broke in, probably ruining whatever Konan had going for herself. She turned to glare at him, though there wasn't much malice in the glare. Sasori, on the other hand, looked away towards the far wall instead.

"Ishiko-san, I would thank you if you didn't interrupt my turn. You'll have your turn with your danna soon enough, I can assure you." She stood up in defeat, casting Deidara one last dirty look. "I think I'm going to have to stop at this time. But just keep in mind what I said, Sasori-san."

Hidan looked ready to interrupt again, but Itachi impulsively clapped his hand over his mouth, halting any further outbursts. The last actual kunoichi was up next, though she looked ready to faint at any moment.

"You're up, Bya-chan! Good luck, yeah!" Deidara chirped cheerily, grinning broadly. That did nothing to help her confidence, however, as she stayed firmly in her seat.

"I-I think I'll re-resign..." She whispered faintly, bypassing red and going straight for a stark white face.

"Oh, come on! Do it, you pansy!" The silver-haired immortal managed to shout out while wrestling with Itachi.

"You can do it, Bya-chan." Deidara added, half-wanting to see what she could do for himself. In an entirely altruistic way, of course; he only wanted to see her get through this for her own self confidence, of course.

If anything, she went paler. "I-I-I c-ca-can't..." Her stuttering was back, and that probably wasn't a good sign. The Iwa-nin was a bit disappointed, but if she wanted to back out, he couldn't force her to do this.

"She resigns. Move along already." Itachi said flatly, much to her relief.

"Fine, fine." Deidara pouted, crossing his arms. But then, a split second later, he realized that it was his turn—and the final round. All or nothing. He snickered evilly, standing up. "You are going to *pay* for that speed training, Daisya-danna. Hell yeah."

"And what makes you think *you* can do any fucking better?" Hidan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, first, I am the most annoying member here, yeah. That means if anyone is getting under danna's skin, it's gonna be me." He explained patiently, keeping Sasori in his peripheral vision to gauge his reaction. "Second, I am already a woman for this mission, so I don't have to waste my turn turning into that. And lastly, and the *real* reason I am going to win this thing, is this, yeah." He held up his two hands, missing the gloves, and the tongues on his palms stuck out at the other

shinobi. Most of them froze, somehow forgetting about that little fact, or most likely thinking he wouldn't stoop as low as to use them. "I have *three* mouths to use, yeah."

The contest promptly ended with that.

Deidara was declared the winner mostly because the two real kunoichi—and Itachi—demanded that he didn't attempt whatever it was that he was thinking because they didn't want to see it. Hidan was throwing another one of his tantrums at being denied the show he most likely wanted to see (and at being deemed a loser). The blonde probably didn't make it any better by rubbing it in his face, either.

Eventually, however, after much yelling, swearing, glaring, hair-pulling and revenge, Hidan managed to settle down.

Deidara wasn't exactly happy about having the haircut, however.

"You deserved it, you little hussy. You fuckin' cheated and you're not worth sacrificing." The immortal cackled, holding up the blonde locks. The furious Iwa-nin attempted to tackle him, but was restrained by Sasori.

"You can hardly notice it, and if all else fails, you can re-*Henge* and that should fix it!" Sasori attempted to calm him down, dragging him back over toward his spot on the floor. "He only cut five or six inches—"

"*Five or six?!*" The Hyuuga girl now had to join in the holding back as well. Hidan wasn't helping things by dangling the hair in front of Deidara's face.

"Your hair was down to your butt anyway! Now it's to your waist—it's *fine*, brat!" The redhead snarled, shifting to hold his partner in a headlock.

Itachi managed to calm things down when he confiscated the cut hair and burned it with a miniature *Katon*, luckily. "There. Now there's no evidence and no reason to continue this petty argument." The Uchiha stated dispassionately, crossing his arms in front of his breasts. "It's getting late. We should probably be getting to bed."

-.-.-

Twenty minutes later, the team was in their usual heap on the floor. Hinata was again on the edge of said heap, the closest to the door. She didn't mind, though; she slept with her back to it anyway. Any non-ninja who came within ten feet of the door would alert them because of the security jutsus as well.

She snuggled up against Deidara, who usually slept next to her. Thus far she hadn't had a single waking nightmare on the mission, and she probably owed that to him. The faux kunoichi wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. She sighed in contentment, resting her head on his shoulder. "Good night... Dei-kun..."

"G'night, Bya-chan." He murmured back, running one of his hands through her long hair. She soon drifted off into a light doze, half-aware of the rest of the members getting ready and shifting around in their sleeping arrangements. As far as she could make out, Itachi was sleeping on the other side of Deidara, and then it was Konan, Hidan and finally Sasori. The redhead didn't seem to be getting

ready for bed, however, based on his occasional remark.

Good night, Neji-niisan... wherever you are, she thought sleepily, remembering in the past when they would both say goodnight to each other in the Hyuuga compound. That seemed like so long ago.

Finally, Hinata fell into a deep sleep, strangely undisturbed by any sort of dream or nightmare. All around her, the others were likewise going to sleep, nestling in and up against each other for warmth and some semblance of human comfort. The Akatsuki members slept peacefully, and deeply for shinobi. They wouldn't be bothered here; they were in possibly one of the safest spots in the world, surrounded by their own security jutsus and the Rain Lord's palace. Still, being comfortable and relaxed as they were, they let themselves sleep perhaps a bit deeper than what they usually would. Perhaps a bit too deeply. A shadow silently slipped through the door, amazed at the discovery it had just made.

-.-.-

Deidara awoke to a mixture of things. Mostly it was just the girl beside him shifting slightly, rolling away from him. The sudden lack of warmth, however, was replaced by another one; something warm and wet dribbled down onto his arm. The blonde sleepily opened his eyes, rolling over onto his back.

He noticed that the Hyuuga kunoichi was now facing away from him, back to him. It must've just been the shadows of the dark room, but he could've sworn the shirt she slept in had been a lighter color. In slight annoyance, he glanced down to see that his arm was also the same peculiar darker color in the dim light. The room *was* only lit by the moonlight of a single window, but he didn't think that the shadows would be *that* dark. But... there was something weird about those shadows. They weren't shaped like shadows; they were shaped more like... dots or drips or something.

The things clicked together in the art-nin's mind when he turned back to look above him. The dark, strange shadows, her position facing the door despite her paranoia, her still body. Deidara's eyes widened imperceptibly, absolutely frozen. The white lupine mask of the Iwa ANBU stared back impassively at him, kunai held at his throat.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara is confronted with the thing that embodies the past he's been trying to run from for all these years-how will he handle it? And what of our princess? How much harm can a single ANBU member do-if he's even alone? Things aren't looking good!

A Blast From The Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara had been born near the beginning of the last Great Shinobi war, the one between practically all of the villages. He was, of course, born on Iwa land, though not in the village itself; he was born in a quiet little village on the opposite side of the country. The village had been mostly unharmed in the war, the biggest impact the fighting having on the citizens were the constant demand for shinobi and hard-working men and women. Deidara's father had been a retired Iwa chuunin, rather unremarkable but incredibly loyal and known for his courage in battle.

His father had been off in the war during his birth, fighting on the front lines near the border. His mother, whom he took after the most (aside from his blue eyes), tragically died from childbirth complications. The infant was put in the care of his older sister, a kunoichi who had been put on temporary leave to help their mother. By the time their father returned for a short 'vacation', as he called it, Deidara was nearly a year old.

Still, Deidara was a very happy child. True, a bit mischievous, but a good kid nonetheless. He had been fascinated with all manners of flying creatures practically since his birth, and at a young age tried to copy the process of flight in all manners of creation. He also proved himself to be a natural genius, in the fact that he could learn most things quite quickly and could adapt those skills to suit his own needs. His father was overjoyed at seeing his son and seeing his genius.

But he only had a few months off before he was called back to the war. Deidara was once again left in the care of his older sister, safely tucked away in the far-reaches of the Iwa mountains, a whole world away from the war his country was fighting for.

The little boy grew up happy and rather naïve about the ways of the ninja. He didn't express any particular want or need to become a shinobi, for which his sister was secretly thankful. She had been on the front lines only once, and it had been horrible enough for her to want her precious brother to never see any of the carnage of the world of the shinobi. The pair bonded, as only sisters and brothers can, and were known throughout the village as inseparable. Deidara adored his sister, and she positively doted on him.

In that aspect, Deidara had an incredibly lucky—and joyful—childhood. When he was almost six, however, tragedy struck that would change his life forever.

A band of Grass ninja had managed to get through the defenses and circle around, cutting a wide, destructive swath in their wake as they burned fields and crops in an attempt to starve Iwagakure. They attacked the little town mercilessly, setting fire to every building within reach, jutsus flying between the sparse amount of ninja available and the invaders. Flames roared into the silent, dark night, and screams of terror and grief rent the night. It was on that night that Deidara got his first taste of shinobi.

-.-.-

"Onee-chan!" The small blonde ran as fast as he could through the village, past burning buildings

and screaming people. A pair of ninja darted past, pursued by another not a split second later. Deidara looked around desperately for his sister, wondering where she had gone and why she dared leave him in a situation like this. "Nee-chan!"

The mother of one of the other children in the village spotted him and hastily grabbed his wrist, tugging him along urgently behind her. "Hurry, Deidara! There's no time to search for your sister! We have to get out of the village!"

"Not without nee-chan!" He struggled in vain, trying to pull himself loose to continue searching. Screw the ninja; none of them showed any interest in the little boy, anyway. "Have you seen her?"

"No, I haven't seen her yet, but I'm sure she's fine. She's a kunoichi, after all." The woman replied, half warmth, half sheer desperation. Deidara noticed the tears on her cheeks in the blaze of the fires, and her eyes were wild and terror-stricken. He wondered if he looked the same way—but no, he hadn't been crying.

In a sudden surge of strength, he tore his arm away from her, sprinting in the opposite direction, back towards the heart of the village. "I'm gonna find nee-chan! You go out of the village and be safe!" He called over his shoulder, flicking a too-long lock of his blonde hair out of his eyes.

"Deidara! Wait! Come back!" The woman shouted, but he was a fast kid and he knew it. He rounded a corner and took the most maze-like route he could think of towards their house. His sister would be there, definitely.

But what met the boy's eyes was *not* what he was looking for. The house—his *home*—was ablaze, one of the walls already fallen in. The smoke obscured the night sky above him, and all he could see was his house, where he had lived for all of his life, disappearing and dying before his eyes.

Deidara just turned and ran, shouting, "Onee-chan! Nee-chan, where *are* you?!"

One of the men from the village, a man who was a shinobi, ran past and didn't spare him a passing glance. He jumped up onto the nearest rooftop, his sandals barely escaping the tops of the flames, seemingly jumping on top of them. Two steps further and a dark shape hurtled out of the thick smoke, and they both fell down onto the ground. Deidara ran over, morbidly curious, but there was only the man from his own town. The man was dead, lying in a pool of blood with several kunai sticking out of his back and neck.

Deidara resisted the urge to throw up at the sight of the blood. Instead he made a face, backing away slowly. The colossal impact suddenly hit him in one smoke-filled, spiraling moment—people were *dying*. There were bad people in the village who were killing people and destroying their homes and belongings. This was *war*.

The blue-eyed blonde continued backing up until his back hit something solid. Deidara's head snapped up to look into the white, animal-shaped mask of another ninja. "What are you doing here, kid? Shouldn't you have evacuated with the rest of the civilians?" From the voice, it was a man, though the mask concealed any other identity.

"Have you seen my nee-chan?" The little boy asked instead, still looking up at him upside-down.

"Kid, you need to get out of here. Run for it." The man said impatiently, shooing him along. A split second later, however, he was in front of Deidara, blocking a sudden barrage of shuriken that flew out of the dark smog. The blonde stumbled back, tripping and falling on his butt. That man had moved *fast*—and where had those throwing stars come from?! "Kid, run!"

Another figure melted out of the shadows, moving towards them with jerky steps. The figure's arm shot forward, and another volley of shuriken flew out of the silhouette, but again the masked ninja in front of him blocked them, almost effortlessly. Deidara didn't need any further encouragement; he scrambled to his feet, turned tail, and ran for his life.

But then, suddenly, there was a yell and an explosion. The impact threw the child head-first into the dirt, sending him tumbling. When he got back to his feet, he turned and saw the masked man up on a still-stable rooftop, making some sort of hand signs and throwing what appeared to be small, clay *bombs* on the ground around his enemy, and with another shout, they all exploded. It rocked the ground and sent the boy down again, but when he looked back up, nothing but admiration was shining in his large, blue eyes.

"Wow, that's—" Deidara was cut off by an arm snaking itself around his chest, a hand clamping itself over his mouth. Immediately he started flailing, trying to break free from whoever had captured him, trying to shout for the mysterious masked ninja who made the awesome explosions to come save him again.

"Shush! Dei-chan, it's me!" His sister hissed in his ear, and immediately he went limp in her grasp. "What are you still doing in the village?!" She turned him around to face him, releasing his mouth.

"Nee-chan!" Instead of answering, he threw his arms around the girl, burying his face in her neck. "I was looking for you!"

"Deidara! You shouldn't *be* here!" She tried to tug him off of her, reprimanding him. But Deidara wouldn't let go of her, so she eventually gave up and instead picked him up as she stood. He shifted so he could look back at the fiery scene, searching his masked hero out. "Come on, Dei-chan. I need to get you out of here."

"Mm, okay." He replied shortly, still scanning the area. "Nee-chan, you should have seen it! There was this guy, and he was wearing this weird mask, and he was a ninja! He made explosions! Out of *clay*! It was soooo cool! I wanna be like him when I grow up!"

"I thought you didn't want to be a ninja?" She asked in amusement. She, too, was glancing around them, but not for the same reasons.

Deidara instantly frowned, spotting the hole in his logic and dream. "Hmm... fine then! I'll be an artist! Then I don't have to fight or train or work or anything and I can just make stuff all day long."

"You do that, Dei-chan. I'll come see your art every day if you do." She replied distractedly, wondering where those two ninja had gone. She ducked into the doorway of one of the few non-burning buildings, still clutching him to her chest. "When we get out of here, you grow up and be happy and be the absolute best artist in the world, okay? Don't get anyone talk bad about your art if you really like it."

He hadn't understood at the time the danger he'd been in. Grass ninja were everywhere, but now there were Stone ANBU mixed in along with them, confusing everyone and if possible, making it even more lethal for the civilians. Buildings were collapsing left and right, and bodies were everywhere. The fires were spreading as well, adding to the mass chaos.

Deidara had just looked up and grinned at his older sister, promising to follow the rules she set up for him.

The pair darted from building to burning building, staying in the shadows as much as possible and keeping quiet. The young boy thought it more of an annoyance that he couldn't talk anymore than

an actual preservation measure. "Nee-chan..." He whispered loudly.

"Shh!" She gave him a stern look that shut him up.

There was the sound of a far-off explosion, and Deidara's eyes lit up. He was learning to recognize the sound, and looked forward to every time he heard one. For the rest of his life, it would be the same way.

-.-.-

Deidara's sister died that night, after leaving him at the evacuation spot with the other villagers. She had went back in to continue fighting, saying it was her nindo to do so. His sister's death quieted the six-year-old down tremendously, and from then on he was usually seen silently playing with clay from the nearby river, molding it into lopsided birds or squashed-looking bugs.

During the funeral, the young boy hadn't said a single word. He only started crying when he saw her body, laid out to show proper respect. Unbeknownst to everyone present, the girl (who was much too young to have died so tragically, everyone said) wasn't buried with her hitai-ate. Deidara had taken it from her body, and secretly tied it around his neck and kept it covered with a jacket. He still never wanted to become a ninja, especially after what he had seen that night in the village.

But then, only a year later, his life was once more thrown into the war.

When he was seven years old, Deidara's father died in the war, and it gave him a new dream. He still wanted to become an artist—but this time, an artist like the masked one he had seen. For the first time in his life, Deidara wanted to become a ninja, to join in the war and avenge his father—and sister.

He migrated over into the actual village of Iwagakure, and attended the Academy there. In just one short year, he graduated at the top of his class. He had mastered all of the basics of ninjutsu and taijutsu, and while admittedly his genjutsu wasn't the best, his other skills more than made up for it. He had taught himself how to fuse his chakra into the clay he sculpted with, creating explosions to fight with. Still, sculpting by hand took too long. In a fight, he knew it would be pushing it to take the time to manually create his bombs.

That was when Deidara was placed in his genin team.

His sensei was a man who often experimented with ninjutsu, and experimented with how far he could push the human body's limits. It was originally Deidara's idea, to create the mouths on his palms. It took nearly a year on his genin team, wearing down his sensei until finally the man agreed to the forced mutation.

Only a week after Deidara gained his new mouths, he mastered the use of them and implemented their use into his ninjutsu. His skills skyrocketed. And only a month after that, his team was entered into the chuunin exams. He and one of his comrades, the kunoichi of the team, were both promoted to chuunin.

The war was nearing its end, or so everyone in Iwagakure thought. They thought that the other villages would fall soon, and the Land of Earth would take its rightful place as the head of the new world order.

That was when Konoha's Yellow Flash single-handedly decimated half of the Iwa shinobi on the front lines. The war turned for the worst, and now the Stone was just trying to stay afloat and keep from getting invaded.

It was just the chance Deidara had been waiting for. He eagerly volunteered for a new squadron to be sent to the front lines, and as depleted as they were of ninja, they allowed a newbie chuunin to go.

After a few bloody but short missions, the young blonde's prowess with his art became widespread news. Not a year after being promoted to chuunin, he was entered in for examination to become a jounin. One more successful sabotage mission against Konoha forces clinched it for him, and he became one of the youngest jounin in the history of Iwagakure, at the age of ten. (Some of it may have been influenced by Iwa's desperate need for higher-ranking shinobi, but that didn't change the fact of the matter to Deidara.)

It was on his first mission as a jounin leader that everything went horribly, horribly wrong.

A new jounin on the Leaf's side had become known to a lot of the soldiers, and the 'flee on sight' order for spotting the Yellow Flash still stood. The new jounin was just as young as Deidara, his teammates said, only his speed was crazy and he had some sort of lightning-based jutsu that was lethal to their earth-based moves. Deidara just laughed off their anxiety and continued ahead with the mission, to destroy a bridge connecting Kusa to a nearby supply village. Konoha would be the least of their worries on this mission.

"I'm getting tired. Shouldn't we stop for the night, Deidara-taichou?" One of the men grunted, wiping sweat out of his eyes. Most of the shinobi under his command were older than him, and they hadn't taken kindly to being bossed around by a ten-year-old pyromaniac. At every chance, they found something to complain about.

"You're Iwa shinobi, start acting like it." Deidara replied irritably, rolling his eyes. "We're only a few kilometers from the target now, anyway."

"From the *first* target, you mean." The nearest ninja, an annoyingly loud kunoichi, piped up. "We still have to take out that Kusa team as well."

"One step at a time." He replied snappishly. He was a jounin, damn it! It was time he started getting treated like one! "Just keep your guards up. We're still in the war zone."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." She huffed, crossing her arms. A moment later, however, she spoke up again. "Do we even know where—"

"Shh! Keep quiet, will you?!" Deidara snarled. One of the other men grunted his agreement with the demand, but the other two looked mutinous. The kunoichi looked affronted.

"Fine! I won't say anything more!"

That was when they were ambushed.

The Iwa shinobi scattered like leaves when a pair of foreign ninja charged into the clearing.

Deidara couldn't stop to think of *how* they had gotten spotted, he was more focused on trying to get away from the nearest, an angry looking kunoichi who was following him determinedly. The metal plate on her Konoha hitai-ate shone harshly in the moonlight.

Deidara back flipped and leaped up into the nearest tree, jumping out again when she followed him. She formed hand signs, and likewise the young Iwa jounin dipped his hands into his clay pouch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the lone kunoichi on his own team go down. The female ninja he was currently facing created some sort of chakra-based weapon, and tried to catch Deidara with them. He noticed this and was all the more intent on keeping away from her—who knew what those hands could do to his body if she caught him.

He threw a clay bird at her, but she ducked out of the way. He raised a hand in a half seal, and the bird fluttered to life and circled around to follow them. The kunoichi noticed, but didn't deviate from her current attack plan. What she didn't notice, however, was the dragonfly he also let loose, who was following her much more closely than the bird.

Unfortunately, Deidara likewise didn't notice something. He didn't notice the leg that suddenly appeared to trip him, and he went face first into the forest floor. Hands were instantly pushing him down into the dirt, forcibly restraining him and keeping his hands apart. "Sensei," he heard the girl gasp into her radio, "We've captured one."

"Roger." A voice crackled back over the link. "Be there in a moment."

Deidara struggled in vain, and then merely contented himself with trying to keep his face out of the leaves enough to breathe. "*K... Katsu!*" He shouted into the dirt, and the bird detonated above them. He had no idea what happened, but the hands holding him down were removed, and he ran for it. Just as fast, however, someone grabbed the back of his flak jacket and yanked him backwards.

Without bothering to look back and see who it was, he called in his dragonfly, detonating it with another "*Katsu!*" Predictably, the hand let go of him, and Deidara fled the scene.

He waited in a nearby Iwa-made cave for any of his teammates. No one showed up. An hour later, he deemed it save enough to do a quick scan-over of the area by bird, seeing if there were any survivors, or if those Konoha-nin were still around. He was too far out of range to contact any of his allies, and it wouldn't do much good to go all that way to report back without getting some semblance of information.

He found his teammate moments later.

Their bodies were thrown unceremoniously into a bloody pile, and a fire was slowly devouring the corpses. Deidara instinctively knew that the Konoha shinobi had started that fire, purposely creating a smoldering one to let the bodies stay there for awhile as a warning to any other Iwa-nin in the area. The blonde tried to fight the urge to throw up at the sight of his dead teammates, and instead altered his course to head back to Iwagakure. Jounin or not, he couldn't complete the mission alone.

--.-

If there was one thing Deidara was, it was loyal to his village. He would gladly die for Iwagakure,

or his Tsuchikage. Any of his teammates, too. But he was still a boy, and he couldn't quite grasp the concept of actual physical death. He'd killed enough, he'd had teammates, friends and family die, but he still couldn't quite wrap his mind around *himself* dying. He was more attached to the noble ideal that was projected by the notion.

Even if the young jounin didn't quite get it, it didn't change the facts. He would die for his land and his village.

He just wanted to die in a different way than what was planned out for him.

-.-.-

Once he was safely back in Iwa territory, Deidara landed his bird and alerted the village to his arrival and his team's demise, and more importantly, about the Konoha ninja who were out to capture Iwa-nin for information. He was only told to report back to the village *immediately*.

Deidara oh so naively didn't catch the tone of urgency in the man's voice ordering him back.

He hopped off of his bird, minimizing it again with a hand sign. It wouldn't do to waste clay in these dangerous times, so he just had the miniscule thing ride on his shoulder for now. It blended in nicely with his vest. Several shinobi were coming out of the main gate, to greet him. He smiled exhaustedly and raised his hand in greeting, the mouth licking its lips.

It wasn't until the first kunai hit his shoulder that he felt something was off.

The men coming out to meet him weren't regular shinobi; they all bore the concealing mask of the ANBU. Several more kunai hit him, and Deidara made his first mistake; he panicked. The boy turned and fled, the thought that he could *never* outrun a team of ANBU never crossing his mind. And never mind the fact that he was injured.

He hastily tore one of the kunai out of his thigh and threw it backwards over his shoulder. There was the dull clink of metal hitting one of the masks, but no shouts, and there wasn't any smell of blood. One of them threw another kunai, and he felt the metal pierce the back of his calf. So they were trying to kneecap him, eh? Well whatever the hell was up with them, he wasn't going to come quietly.

He kept his ears open, and the next time he heard the telltale movement of their arms, he leapt to the right and rolled back to his feet. He escaped new injury, no matter how awkward the move had been. He did it again as he heard the ANBU behind him move, but this time a kunai just narrowly missed his ankle. That wouldn't work again, no doubt.

"Halt!" One of them shouted, aiming another kunai.

Of course, now they talk, Deidara mentally snarled. It was just like those snooty ANBU; attack first and ask questions later.

This time the team chasing him all threw a kunai, so he had no choice but to jump to avoid it. Of course, this was what they were waiting for; he couldn't dodge in midair. The blonde knew this as well, and immediately tossed his mini bird in the air, enlarging it with a hand sign. He grabbed onto the bird's foot with one hand, it lifting him into the air safely out of the next barrage of kunai. "What the hell do you want with me?!" He shouted, now safely above them. Damn, he *hated*

ANBU sometimes. They were so... annoying.

None of the masked shinobi replied. Deidara frowned down at them, intent on keeping silent until one of them answered him. If this was the welcome he received, it'd only be common sense not to venture anywhere near the village until he knew what was going on—and why they wanted him inside it.

Suddenly, one of them jumped up into the air, and threw another kunai at the jounin. But as he forced his bird to lunge violently to the left, another ANBU had jumped as well, and aimed another kunai at him. This time, momentum was working against Deidara. The kunai buried itself in his wrist, and with a yelp of pain, he let go and fell.

One arm now practically completely useless, Deidara hit the ground running. He ducked under a hawk-faced man's strike and hurtled over a wolf-faced one's leg. Something caught the back of his flak jacket, and instinctively he whirled around with a backhand.

But it wouldn't do. A hand grabbed his fist, forcing it behind his back. A moment later, the ten-year-old was beaten.

Deidara was transported into Iwagakure, bleeding, beaten and severely disappointed in himself and his village.

...*I hate ANBU*, he thought flatly; he was being carried in a very child-like way that was no way fitting for a ninja of his rank. Of course, he it was more for the inconvenience than anything. He'd been injured much worse than a few kunai, and if anything, his pride was what hurt the most. ANBU were a needed part of any village, that he knew, but *why* the Tsuchikage would have to send out a team of them to capture a newbie jounin was beyond him...

Deidara was brought up to the leader's tower, bound with chakra-draining shackles and stripped of his hitai-ate. It was humiliating, whatever it was for. The blonde stood in front of the Tsuchikage, red-faced and looking mutinous. "...Yes, sir?" He ground out, glaring out venomously at the ANBU lining the room.

"Such arrogance is pitiful." The man replied, not without a good dose of contempt. His tone threw Deidara off, at least momentarily. *Had* he really done something wrong...? It wasn't *his* fault that his team died! "Returning to the village after that attempt really shows about your intelligence and judgment, Deidara."

The blonde didn't dare speak. Something was off here. Something serious had happened, but for the life of him, he couldn't think of what. He had done nothing wrong except lose teammates, but that was no way his fault, and anyway, they were unremarkable shinobi anyway. Their loss couldn't have been *that* much of a blow to Iwagakure... was it?

The Tsuchikage motioned for the ANBU nearest him to come over. "Deidara, *why* did you betray the village?"

"What?!" He burst out, unable to contain his shock. "Tsuchikage-sama, I have been nothing if not *loyal* to this village since I joined the Academy! I have been devoted to my country since birth! *Why* am I being accused of treason?!"

"Silence! This ANBU member right here," the leader gestured lazily to the masked ninja beside him, "Personally saw you lead a group of Kusa-nin into the village gates. Those same Kusa-nin slaughtered two dozen civilians and three of my best chuunin! Betrayal of the village is not permitted in times of peace—why the hell would you think you could come back to the village like

nothing happened in a *war*?!"

"I-I was just out on a mission! I just got back half an hour ago, Tsuchikage-sama!" A note of desperation entered his voice, and his mind was beginning to race. *Surely* the man couldn't reject the truth?! "I was on a mission with my teammates and we were—"

"Then where *are* your teammates, Deidara?" The ANBU member asked sharply.

Deidara ducked his head. All of them dying on a single mission was damning evidence.

Slowly, the Tsuchikage withdrew a scroll from his desk. The young jounin looked up through his bangs, almost shyly, mostly just afraid of what it may be. It all felt like some sort of demented nightmare, or perhaps a genjutsu.

"For the charge of high treason—betrayal—of your home village—" He started solemnly, unrolling the scroll as he read.

Deidara's head jerked up immediately, and he shouted, "*No*! I didn't betray Iwa! I was out on a mission—"

"It is your word against my ANBU captain." The Tsuchikage replied calmly, unrolling a bit more of the scroll. "'—of your home village, you, Takemitsu Deidara, aged ten years and seven months, rank of a new jounin, will hereby'—"

"I was on a mission! I was on a mission that killed my teammates! I didn't lead any Kusa-nin into the village!" Deidara shouted pleadingly. He wrestled with the cuffs on his wrists, not caring that his particular branch of jutsu wasn't affected in the least by the shackles. "Give me back my hitai-ate—I swear I'm a loyal jounin!"

"Deidara!" The leader slammed the scroll down on his desk with a resounding 'bang'. The blonde fell silent, though he could begin to feel the beginnings of tears prick the backs of his eyes. "You want to be cross-examined?"

The boy nodded pitifully. "Yeah..."

"You were on a mission to infiltrate Kusa and sabotage a team of ninja there, correct?" He recited, probably from memory.

Eager to redeem himself and clear his name, the Iwa-nin nodded again, with an eager "Yeah...!"

"You left approximately six hours ago, correct?"

"...Yeah..."

"And you say you returned to Iwa land just a half hour ago, correct?"

The wording gave away the suspicion clear as day. "...Yeah." Deidara muttered under his breath.

"All three of your teammates were killed in battle, correct?"

The explosives user mentally cursed those Konoha shinobi for killing his only witnesses. "...Yeah. All of them..." He admitted. The Tsuchikage paused a long moment, the barest hint of a small smile visible.

"And you report you were ambushed by Konoha ninja? Even though your mission was supposed to take you *deep* in Kusa territory?" The skepticism was blatantly there for everyone present to hear

and make note of. If Deidara had any sympathizers up until that point, they were gone now.

"How should *I* know? Yeah, they were killed by Konoha shinobi! A girl who used chakra as a weapon, probably a medic, and a silver-haired boy! They were Konoha-nin—*it wasn't me!* Yeah they were killed, but 'yeah' is all you're looking for, isn't it?! Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever, it wasn't me!" Panic edged into his voice, making him sound hysterical. He was *not* going to be framed for a crime he didn't commit.

"Deidara, your story is pitifully weak and you have no proof." The ANBU captain said calmly. Deidara looked up at him through his bangs, and for a brief moment, he could peer into the eyeholes of the mask. The eyes behind were glinting... with smugness.

He was the one who had framed Deidara.

The blonde had no idea whether it had really happened, or if the man had just made it up to get him in trouble. Hell, he didn't even know *why*. He was just a ten-year-old jounin who liked to make things blow up. He only knew that *this* was the man who had done it. This was the man who was going to get him killed.

"...No further comment?" The Tsuchikage asked dutifully. Deidara looked back at the leader of his village, and saw for the first time, perhaps, with unclouded eyes. The Tsuchikage was a down-to-earth man, a man who was paranoid with this ongoing war and was even going as far as to murder his own ninja to prevent any type of betrayal in his ranks. He wasn't going to lose control of his village, not when the war was so unstable and could tilt in anyone's favor.

Deidara could only stare at him. It felt as if something had broken inside of him. He suddenly didn't feel tied to any village, didn't have any obligations to anyone. Not even himself. He was going to die, he knew that; he was injured and young and he was panicking. But he wasn't going to go down without a fight.

"You are hereby sentenced to death by blade." The Tsuchikage finished grandly, unaware of the terror he had just loosed. "The captain here will see to your execution for the treasonous act—"

Deidara had his hands around the man's neck before he could finish. He was pulled violently away, but he only took the opportunity to swing his hands up and grab on of the many kunai that were imbedded in his body. He began slashing away, and somewhere between ANBU members and the Tsuchikage, Deidara's chakra shackles came off and he called in his clay bird. He still had a pouch of clay as well.

-.-.-

At ten years old, Deidara was declared an S-rank missing-nin. He had been framed for betraying his village, the one thing that kept him tied to any semblance of rules or sanity. So he truly paid them back by preserving the image of a burning Iwagakure in his memory forever.

At ten years old, Deidara killed the Tsuchikage and all of the ANBU that were in the village. He depleted the force by half. He then finished his grand finale by creating as many bombs as he could with his remaining clay and detonating them all at once—the resulting explosion leveled half of the village.

At the age of a mere ten years, Deidara was betrayed and hurt by those he had valued most. He

fled from the burning Iwagakure, turning his hatred for his village into hatred for ANBU and any ninja still stupid enough to belong to a village or country. He was alone for the first time in his life. He walked away from the burning buildings and the sounds of screams, pulling kunai out of his limbs as he walked.

And it was at the age of ten years old that Deidara first heard about the Akatsuki.

But it had been much earlier than the age of ten when he had first caught the Akatsuki's eye.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: So now we know about Deidara's paranoia with the ANBU! But what will become of it?

Divide

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata awoke in pain. And not the normal aches she felt; this was sharp, acute, and felt like someone had jabbed a kunai into her chest. "Hold still." Itachi's voice grunted somewhere above her. Instinctively she obeyed, eyes screwed shut and trying hard not to move any part of her body. It hurt *so* much. She hadn't ever felt like this before, not even when Gaara had attacked her—not even in the *Tsukuyomi*, really. That had been more of a fake pain... but this, this was all too real.

"...Alright, sit up." A firm hand slipped itself under her back, forcing her up into a sitting position. She winced, cracking open an eye. The first thing she noticed was that there was blood. There was blood *everywhere*. Both of her off-white eyes snapped open, and the heiress bit her bottom lip.

There was a large puddle of blood near the edge of the blanket pile, getting soaked up into the fabrics. A body was lying face-down in it, long, dark ginger hair splayed out over its back. Hinata also noticed that *she* had blood on her and promptly realized that she probably had been stabbed with a kunai, by whoever that guy was. "What—" She turned and saw everyone sans Itachi huddled around Deidara, who was in a likewise bloody situation. His eyes were wide and staring blindly at the far wall, and his body was shaking. "Wh-What happened?"

"Oh, *good*. Finally." Sasori sighed in relief, running a hand through his hair. "Maybe now he'll calm down..."

"We were attacked. More precisely, you and Deidara were attacked." Itachi explained quickly. She noticed that he wasn't in the jutsu anymore, and was in fact wearing his cloak. She frowned at that, and he elaborated, "Circumstances have changed in the mission."

"Hinata-san, did you wake up at all?" Konan asked quietly, sitting cross-legged on the mattress. She appeared the epitome of calm, whereas everyone else were in varying forms of panic or tenseness. The kunoichi shook her head, wincing again when it jarred her back slightly.

"Who is that...?" Hinata gestured vaguely towards the corpse.

"ANBU." Deidara gave a small twitch that didn't go unnoticed. Sasori glanced at him coolly, then continued, "*Iwa* ANBU."

Then it hit her: everyone here was *confused*. They must've awoken with Hinata and Deidara both injured with an Iwagakure ANBU in the room. That alone wasn't probably much of a problem... but the issue was *who* the ANBU was targeting, or who he was sent by. Deidara being so closemouthed about his past in the village and the sudden arrival of another Iwa-nin wasn't exactly inconspicuous. At the same time, however, they were in enemy territory (albeit enemies that were also at odds with Iwagakure), and it could've easily been sent by the Rain Lord. And him attacking Hinata—was it a purposeful targeting, or did he merely attack her because she was the closest to the door? Or closest to Deidara? Was his target even Deidara, or was he moving down the line?

As far as they knew, Deidara could be an enemy.

The blonde—who was still in female form—certainly wasn't defending himself. There was blood splattered on his face and clothes, but he didn't move to wipe it off. He just kept staring blankly ahead, trembling.

"What's wrong...?" She asked, though she didn't know *who* she was asking.

"The pansy-ass just started freaking." Hidan replied tersely.

"He's going into shock." Itachi corrected, Sharingan moving over the room slowly for any signs of other attackers. "I'm more curious as to how a single ANBU member could sneak into this room with all of our security jutsus and the fact that there is half the organization here."

"I was out of it. I was fucking *tired*." The Jashinist shrugged nonchalantly. "And you looked pretty tired, too, the way you went out. Guess that transvestite jutsu is taking a toll, huh?"

"...It was the *Tsukuyomi*, really..." The Uchiha admitted, frowning faintly. Hinata had a sinking suspicion that they all had valid reasons for sleeping a bit too deeply. "But why didn't our security jutsus work?"

"Because we only installed them to detect the casual civilian or an incompetent ninja. None of us had thought to see an ANBU in the Rain Lord's home. He doesn't have any power with the Ame ANBU, and the Rain certainly doesn't have any allies right now." Konan said softly. "We were unprepared."

"Leader-sama is going to kill us all," Sasori groaned with a roll of his eyes. "We have screwed up this mission."

Hinata had crawled uncertainly over towards the blonde, ignoring most of the discussion. He didn't notice her appearance. It was only after she reached out and touched him in the shoulder that he reacted at all; Deidara jumped slightly, and his head whipped around to face her. "...Bya-chan?"

Maybe he wasn't as out of it as they all thought. "Deidara-kun... are you alright?" She asked quietly, kneeling beside him. She glanced nervously at the body but otherwise ignored the unstable circumstances.

"*No*." He replied decisively. With that simple word, the explosives user was shaken out of his withdrawal, and all of the emotion drained out of his face until it left only anger.

"Was it an independent ANBU, or had it been hired by Oshiro—" Sasori was unfortunately picked as the victim of the blonde's rage.

"*You lied*, yeah!" Deidara cut in accusingly. The redhead blinked in mild surprise, though at being interrupted or seeing his partner in the land of the conscious and aware again, it was hard to tell.

"You—I thought I would be safe in the Akatsuki! *I thought Iwa couldn't follow me!*"

Everyone stayed silent, if only for the chance to gain information on the situation. "Deidara, I said no such thing at any point." Sasori replied evenly, carefully.

"Akatsuki is supposed to be a safe haven for the strongest ninja in the world. I made it, yeah! So why can't Iwa leave me alone?!"

"Maybe you really pissed them off?" Hidan suggested helpfully.

"No more than *you*, I bet, yeah." Deidara shot back spitefully. "*Why* is an Iwa ANBU *here*, of all places?! I thought they couldn't track the Akatsuki members."

"Sounds like you overestimated the organization, and in that case, it's your fault." Sasori said flatly, glaring at Hidan to stop him from saying anything further. "Deidara, was this ANBU ninja targeting you specifically?"

"How should *I* know, yeah?" His voice rose a bit, and Hinata was worried he'd really start to panic. "Iwagakure has been following me for years, and how the hell should I know if they finally caught up with me or not?!"

"Deidara. *Calm down.*" Sasori commanded quickly, sensing this as well.

"Don't tell me what to do. You're probably the one who sent the guy after me to try to get me killed, yeah!"

"Now you're just being illogical. You need to calm down."

"No, not until I know why—" Hinata stopped him by grabbing him by the shoulders and turning him to face her. She stared into his eyes and performed two hand signs—for a sleeping genjutsu. "Why... this happened..." Deidara muttered half-heartedly, eyelids drooping. The Hyuuga pushed a little more chakra into the jutsu, and the blonde fell onto his side, soundly asleep.

"Thank you, Hinata-san." Konan replied cheerfully, smiling. "But now the question remains—" The younger kunoichi stiffened when she felt the cold blade of a kunai pressed up against her throat. "—Where do *your* loyalties lie?"

Hinata leaned back cautiously, trying to gauge her position. It would have to be Itachi that was behind her, holding her still with the blade. She couldn't have gotten away from him if she tried. So instead she would have to resort to mere brainpower—in the presences of nothing but the geniuses of the ninja world. "I... I have no loyalties." She said vaguely.

"Are your loyalties to Deidara-san?" Konan continued, still smiling politely. She noticed that they had reverted to using their real names, probably because the mission was a moot point until this was sorted out.

"Fo-For now." She replied evasively, not wanting to get backed into a corner. She had no idea what game they were playing, but it wouldn't do to get devoted to any one cause until she found out the rules.

"Where are his loyalties?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not him."

"...Didn't you just hear him question the Akatsuki and accuse his senior partner of trying to murder him?"

"He—He was... panicking. Deidara-kun was getting hysterical. He... has some issues to work out concerning his home village, and finding an Iwa ANBU probably didn't help that..." It was mostly based on fact, though a lot of that was just based on her guesswork and inference.

"We're talking in circles here. We have only two hours until sunrise and there will be a crowded mansion at this point. We have to resolve this and decide our stand on the issue before then." Sasori broke in irritably. "Itachi, just check to see whether or not she was involved in this."

His hand on her shoulder tilted her backward until she was half-laying in his lap, staring up into rotating Sharingan eyes. Itachi stared down intently at her, and she did her best to look innocent and stare back, all the while thinking *please believe me please think I'm innocent please don't blame us please believe me.*

"She didn't have a hand in this." Her teacher stated in a monotone, leveling his gaze with Sasori's. "We can only assume that neither did Deidara, based on his reaction and her innocence."

"So then *now* what?" Hidan grumbled, crossing his arms. He reached up to play with the pendant on his rosary, looking extremely bored with the whole procession.

"We have... different options. We can outright accuse Oshiro of sending this ANBU in to assassinate us, but then we'll have to reveal that we somehow managed to kill said ANBU." Konan surmised gravely, grimacing slightly.

"We could ignore the whole thing, but again, if Oshiro sent it, he'll wonder why the man didn't report back." Sasori added with his own frown.

"Or we could not say a word of it and kill the whole mansion." The blunette woman finished, and Hidan looked euphoric at this suggestion.

"Leader-sama is not going to be happy, whichever route we choose. This was not supposed to happen in the mission." Itachi muttered darkly. "...Should we alert Kisame or Kakuzu?"

"Already have. They're on alert." She answered primly. "I suggest we take the second option. We still need the location of one of the scrolls, and we'll just have to take the chance that Oshiro sent the ANBU. He won't dare say anything outright if he did."

"It will be tough convincing the man of anything, then." Sasori complained dryly. "He's already been pressuring me to swap rooms and sleep separate from all of you to divide us. And the man keeps asking when we'll be leaving."

"We can afford to sleep in different rooms. You stay with Hidan and Deidara, and we'll sleep... wherever else. Just keep trying, Sasori-san." Konan nodded once, biting her lip. "We can handle ourselves, but just give us our signal if we need to fight or flee."

"It may be for the best if we separated. We can possibly get more information like that." The black-haired man agreed slowly.

-.-.-

Blue eyes opened blearily to a room of commotion. A blur of red passed in front of him, and then something teal and tan and remarkably familiar was being held out to him. "Hurry up, wake up, brat. Get dressed and *hurry up*!"

Deidara couldn't remember falling asleep really, especially after that awful dream. Something about Iwa ANBU following him even into the Akatsuki... Robotically he flipped the oversized shirt over his head, beyond caring about walking around in his undergarments. He'd done worse in his life. The blonde tied back his hair in high pigtails again, flipping them over his shoulders as he wrapped the sash to the kimono around his waist. Man, was he tired. Exhausted, really.

"What're we doing... yeah...?" He stifled a yawn while pulling on his gloves, making sure his mouths didn't bite the fabric.

"I have yet another meeting with that infuriating man and due to recent changes in circumstances you and Hidan have to accompany me." Sasori said briskly, pulling a shorter-sleeved shirt over a longer-sleeved one. Deidara saw a peculiar black ring around his partner's neck, but shrugged it off as nothing as the redhead hastily flipped the collar up on the shirt.

"...Why?" The blonde asked instead. He glanced around, seeing the three other girls also hurrying about, getting ready and in various states of undress and disarray. "Why're we in such a rush, yeah?"

"Because—nevermind, brat. Just get ready!" The puppet master snapped.

Deidara frowned at him and sidled over towards the Hyuuga kunoichi, muttering, "Who pissed in his coffee..."

"U-Um... Ishiko-chan?" She asked nervously, halfway done braiding her hair. He looked at her, and she instantly averted her eyes. "Do you—do you remember, um, last night...?"

The room visibly stiffened at her quiet question, though for what reason Deidara couldn't guess. "No, not really, yeah. I'm just really tired, so that may be because of that, though..." He gave her a shrug, yawning again. "D'you know why I have to go to the meeting with danna?"

"Akane-chan and Kaoru-chan and I have to split up. Oshiro-sama wants to divide us, and we've... decided that it'd be easier to let him than fight it." She replied hastily, finishing braiding her hair quickly. She practically fled from him, hiding behind Konan.

"Um... okay... yeah..." He said slowly. Honestly, what was going *on* with that girl...

-.-.-

The group was walking a razor's edge on this mission.

They had been successfully attacked and divided, and they couldn't retaliate in the case of either.

Sasori, Hidan and Deidara were the half connected to the Rain Lord. Konan, Itachi and Hinata were completely cut off from them, thanks to the sudden surge in Oshiro's hospitality and busy schedule. They were put in the care of who was announced to be the man's chief mistress, a voluptuous, feisty woman who welcomed them all with open arms. They were practically forced to stay with the resident harem, though Hinata herself didn't particularly mind. It gave her an excuse to stay hidden within the realm of the women, away from the leering gazes of practically every man they'd met in the palace thus far.

Of course, they still had to attempt to gather information, even if their sources were less than ideal.

Konan appeared to be more and more agitated and prone to stress as the days stretched on, without knowing their stance on the mission. She didn't even know what to make of that seemingly random ANBU attack. Hinata and Itachi both caught her pacing and muttering to herself more than once.

The Uchiha seemed perfectly fine in his current situation. He smoothly melded into the folds of the girlish society, finding out tidbits that weren't quite useful and weren't quite useless. He made the remark more than once that he hoped dearly that the other team was making more headway than they were.

Hinata, however, was doing abysmally. The nightmares, without Deidara close by, were keeping her awake at night and the exhaustion was starting to get to her. More than once she nearly fell asleep in the baths. The warm temperature of the rooms they were confined to (they couldn't change it now) was irritating and lulling at the same time, and she had to keep her sleeves rolled up

constantly in search of a slight respite.

Still, she tried her best. Hinata managed to befriend a few of the younger girls, even while it disgusted her that girls as young as she (or younger!) could work like this. None of them, though, would know anything about the scroll or an Iwagakure ANBU member, and the Hyuuga didn't know what else to try to ask.

It was one night, when she was laying in a half-dozing, half-aware state that she found out something terribly important. Since she couldn't sleep, Hinata had taken it upon herself to activate her Byakugan at random times, to check for intruders or anything out of the ordinary. Glancing around with her bloodline limit at all of the sleeping women, she didn't spot any males or anyone in an ANBU mask.

But then, the barest flicker of chakra caught her eye. She turned immediately in that direction, checking Itachi and Konan's positions. They were in the opposite direction, both of them sleeping lightly. Konan's chakra was strained but fine, as was Itachi's. Neither of theirs had the sudden vibrant energy of this third party.

Curious and wary, Hinata slowly rolled over onto her stomach. Whoever had this chakra—it *had* to be a ninja—was on the other side of the room, and didn't appear to be in her normal sight. She focused on the person, fully on guard. The chakra circulatory system was fairly developed with a bit more than average chakra in it, so it probably meant a skilled chuunin or a jounin. It was entirely possible that it could be another ANBU.

Careful not to wake anyone up, the dark-haired girl got up to her feet and tiptoed around sleeping forms. Behind her, Itachi and Konan both stirred slightly. Hinata froze, not wanting to wake them either, if it was a false alarm. Though *how* it could be fake she didn't know. Very few people could fool the Byakugan, and none of them could *create* chakra for it to see.

There was another girl awake, sitting cross-legged and playing with the hem of her kimono. This wasn't the one with the chakra, though Hinata received a strange look. A moment too late, she figured out that with her Byakugan active, it would be as good as an alarm bell for whoever this intruder was. She smiled nervously at the other girl, switching off her bloodline limit and covering the movement by tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

Hinata could find this person without her Byakugan. Whoever it had been was awake, and had been sitting up the last time she saw. And Hinata *was* a kunoichi after all; she could root out another ninja quite easily. Shinobi had a certain... grace around them.

She crept along silently, looking at all of the sleeping forms. None of them shifted or stirred, and they were all deep asleep. It seemed like this would be almost *easy* to find the perpetrator. But as the minutes ticked by, she still didn't see any sign of anyone who could be out of place. She was forced to reactivate her bloodline limit, tilting her head to let her hair hide her eyes from casual view.

There was no one there.

The only three chakra systems she could see were the members of her team (including herself). Absolutely every single other person in that room didn't have an ounce of chakra, or was skilled enough to hide it completely from the Byakugan. And if that was the case, they'd have to know she *had* the Byakugan—and thus would have to know her heritage, and that would put the whole mission in jeopardy.

Or the mystery intruder could have moved out of her range of vision, into another part of the

mansion. That was plausible. Or the dark-haired girl could have imagined, or dreamed, the whole thing. Hinata had to admit that she had been operating on the barest minimum amount of sleep humanly possible these past few days; could she have imagined it?

Smiling uncertainly to herself, the heiress made her way back towards her temporary makeshift bed. Could she have fooled herself to the point that she was making stuff up concerning her bloodline limit? It hadn't ever happened to her before, and as far as she knew, hadn't happened in the history of her clan. But certainly it had happened—albeit with regular sight—often enough with stressed shinobi... right?

Her smile dropped into a bit of a frown, and she only managed to confuse herself further. Seeing an enemy's chakra wasn't something to shake a stick at, and now she was faced with the dilemma of telling Itachi and Konan and putting them on edge or keeping it to herself at the risk that it *was* another—

"Haya-san?"

Hinata nearly jumped out of her skin. A high-pitched cross between a shriek and a squeak escaped her, and she whirled around, bringing her hands up in the *Juuken* stance, prepared to strike. Itachi was in front of her, eyes wide and mouth frowning. It looked like she'd surprised her just as much as he did her—though admittedly seeing his face that *expressive* was almost amusing.

"..." The heiress felt the color drain out of her face, realizing just what she had done in front of him. Mortifying. She had *squealed* and hadn't even noticed him come up behind her, and if he'd used her name it was apparent that he wasn't even trying to be silent. Hinata laughed in embarrassment, rubbing the back of her neck. "I-I guess I'm just a little ti-tired, s-sorry..."

"Tired enough that you jump and scream when someone approaches you?" Konan suddenly appeared right beside her, and Hinata repeated her earlier action with a shriek. Only then the unfortunate girl fainted dead away, falling with a thump on the hardwood floor. The two Akatsuki members looked down at her for a long moment, trying to figure out what had just transpired.

"...I'll take her back to her bed." Itachi offered, schooling his features back into impassiveness. He hauled her up onto his back in a piggyback position, shifting her so their kimonos didn't fall off.

"You certainly did a number on her, if the *Tsukuyomi* won't even let her sleep after this amount of time." Konan said softly, glancing around. "I wonder what she was doing over here, anyway..."

"I don't know, but I think we should go to bed. I have a feeling that tomorrow is going to be eventful..." The stoic Uchiha avoided her gaze, though there was the barest hint of a sliver of guilt in his coal black eyes.

Konan noted this, and just smiled slightly.

--.-

Hinata awoke with the glorious revelation that she had *slept*. She couldn't remember exactly having fallen asleep, but having a what felt like a full night's sleep was nothing short of bliss. She was lying next to something warm, and instinctively she snuggled closer to it. The Hyuuga cracked open an eye, noting the fuzzy colors and bright light. *How late in the day is it...?* she wondered blearily.

Hinata wanted nothing more to go back to sleep, even if she felt wonderfully rested. Her shinobi's sense was urging her to get up, however. She sighed softly and moved closer to the warm, feeling fabric under her touch. *Must be a blanket, warmed by my body heat during the night... or, mm, maybe a nice pillow*, she thought sleepily, wrapping her arms around it. *No nightmares... that felt good.*

She drifted off for a few minutes, when the force of what she had just thought hit her.

No nightmares.

Her white eyes snapped open blindly. *What?! No nightmares? Is Deidara—am I better?*

Then Hinata looked up at the pillow she had her arms around. The female face of Itachi stared impassively back at her, where she was wrapped around his waist. "Are you awake finally?" He asked flatly.

"...Ack! I-I'm so sorry!" The kunoichi practically teleported away from her teammate and teacher, hastily turning red. But then a second thought hit her, and without thinking, she murmured, "Wait... I didn't have any nightmares..."

Itachi stared at her with his usual lidded glare. "You didn't have nightmares when sleeping this close to the source?" He asked. Her blush returned full force, and she scooted even farther away from him.

"I-I-I..." She stammered, adjusting her kimono fretfully. She noticed that the Uchiha's hair was also mussed, and his own kimono was wrinkled. Had he been sleeping there beside her, or merely laying there as to not to disturb her? "I don't know..."

"I thought you were supposed to be taking care of those nightmares." He changed the subject, and she frowned.

"Y-You just said to, um, figure out what I f-fear from them... nothing about *stopping* them..." She said quietly, glancing away rebelliously. It seemed a bit hypocritical for him to be speaking to her about the very things that *he* caused.

"I thought that it was quite apparent. Evidently it wasn't." He stated dryly, obviously resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "At any rate... what were you doing up so late last night?"

"I... um... saw someone. With chakra." She lowered her voice, glancing around for any eavesdroppers. Itachi likewise mimicked her, though for the briefest moment, his eyes shone red. "I couldn't find them, though..."

He didn't question her. Instead he merely said, "...Kaoru needs to be informed of this."

"Yeah..."

The pair stood up without any further words, dusting themselves off primly and fixing their hair and clothes. They regally walked over towards where Konan was sitting, writing something in a scroll. Itachi kept his eyes directly ahead, but Hinata couldn't resist glancing around for anyone suspicious; it hardly seemed plausible that she just *saw* someone with chakra last night and no one had demonstrated any ninja-like ability since they'd been here.

They passed a pair of girls chatting animatedly, painting their nails a bright fuchsia as they spoke. As the undercover pair passed, however, they both abruptly stopped talking. One of them stood up, barring Itachi and Hinata's path. The Uchiha looked mildly outraged at this, but Hinata was more

wary.

"*Aren't* you girls going to be leaving soon?" The geisha demanded heatedly, planting her fists on her hips. The Hyuuga heiress relaxed; the girl only wanted to know when they would get out of 'her' area of work. Territorial, all of these women and girls were...

"I am fairly sure that we will be leaving with Daisya-sama fairly soon." Itachi replied calmly, folding his hands in front of his stomach. "Now... if you please?"

The girl moved out of their way, though not without shooting them both a dirty glare. As they passed her, Hinata heard a very audible mutter of "dirty whores". She turned back to glare back at the audacious girl, when her eyes alighted on the companion she had been talking with.

The girl just smiled innocently up at Hinata, blowing on her nails gently. Her green eyes glittered like ice.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Things heat up as the stakes are raised-is there an enemy shinobi among them?

And Conquer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had started innocently enough. Sasori was trading 'political bullshit' with the Rain Lord for the past few hours, and Deidara, sitting beside him, was very obviously trying to stay awake. Every now and then his blonde head would slowly sink down, then bob back up rather violently as he caught himself. It was getting to the point where all three of them (Hidan was there, but at least he was awake) were paying more attention to the dozing shinobi than the actual talk.

"...Is she alright?" Oshiro finally asked, gesturing to Deidara, who did another one of the annoying head bob things. Sasori resisted the urge to smack his partner upside the head.

Instead he just plastered a smirk on his face, explaining, "Oh, yes, she's just a bit, erm, *tired*. Hasn't been getting a whole lot of sleep lately, you know?" Inside, the puppet master was wanting to throw up. Some of the things he had to put up with... and now he had to cover for his stupid partner, who was *just* idiotic enough to stay up much too late last night playing with his small amount of clay that Sasori hadn't been able to confiscate.

Deidara didn't react in the least (Hidan practically shoved his fist into his mouth to stop himself from laughing at their expense), so the Suna artist surmised that he was *really* tired. And if he was that exhausted, his chakra was bound to be unstable and weakened. Deidara need to wake up. Now.

Oshiro, on the other hand, was chuckling good-naturedly. It was a forced laugh. Sasori imperceptibly narrowed his eyes, his own smile becoming a bit more strained. Gods, he *hated* that man. "No problem with that, no problem at all... it's just that it's rather impolite to fall asleep in the middle of a meeting!"

"Mm, yes, I know... But she's not exactly the brightest, and no doubt all this political talk doesn't make much sense to her." Sasori scooted over and wrapped his arm around Deidara's shoulder, shaking him none-too-gently. "Ishiko-chan, *wake up*." The blonde barely stirred.

He cursed mentally; the infernal Iwa-nin was jeopardizing the mission with his idiocy! The redhead shook Deidara a bit harder, and this time he awoke with a start. "Wha—?"

"Nice of you to join us, *Ishiko-chan*. Oshiro-sama and I were just discussing how *rude* it was of you to just drift off in the middle of our talks." He said forcefully, gritting his teeth. He was not known for his patience, especially where it concerned the blonde. Hidan made another sound, almost like a strangled laugh. Sasori shot him a death glare, adding, "It's also rather *rude* to just laugh at others' expense, Masao. Especially when those others' include two Lords."

"A-Ah, right. Sorry then." Of course, the immortal sounded nothing of the sort.

And apparently Deidara wasn't feeling too sorry, either, as he was now leaning on Sasori's shoulder and snoring softly.

He's going to get us all killed, he thought sardonically. He put his mind to work, trying to figure out a way to dismiss Deidara from this meeting—and any following—while simultaneously keeping him out of trouble. If there was a way he could rejoin Konan and the others... Sasori's muddy brown eyes flickered momentarily towards the Rain Lord. The man didn't notice; he was too busy chortling at the scene. Would it suffice to merely ask that he could send Deidara to his room to

catch up on his sleep, and hope to the gods that the dumb blonde was smart enough to figure out that the was supposed to meet up with the others?

But, of course, first he had to wake the ignorant artist up. He could, naturally, do a number of things to his partner, but none of them seemed appropriate for doing in front of the very non-shinobi Rain Lord.

Deidara sighed in his sleep and moved closer to his partner, murmuring, "Bya-chan..." The redhead could've slit his throat and killed them all now—if only he knew where that damned scroll was, he would have. The chances that his partner would forget the circumstances were running high, and he might say something worse than a pet name next time. Sasori really was fighting the urge to strangle him. Instead he remained calm, and shook the blonde again.

"Wake up. *Now*."

The Rain Lord and Hidan both found the whole scene to be amazingly amusing, however.

"...Mm?" Deidara blinked sleepily, yawning. Then, the thing that Sasori had been fearing happened: the Iwa-nin forgot where they were and slipped up. "Saso—"

The Suna-nin was forced to cut him off by dragging his younger partner into his lap, bending down to crush his lips against the artificially soft ones of his temporary concubine. Deidara jerked awake, or at least into some semblance of consciousness. He gasped slightly, and Sasori was forced to deepen the kiss, not only to *make sure* the idiot got the message, but for the Rain Lord's sake.

But just as Sasori was about to pull away and shove the blonde out the door under the reasoning that 'he needed more sleep', Deidara responded by wrapping his arms around his neck, pulling him back down.

What the hell, was Sasori's only thought.

-.-.-

And take that, danna, for trying to take advantage of me in my sleep! Deidara thought savagely, half-grinning against his partner's mouth. He had just been sleeping, quite comfortably, until all of a sudden he awoke to find Sasori sticking his tongue down his throat. He was going to make sure that the redheaded bastard *never* lived this down now.

The redheaded bastard in question growled something, but due to the unfortunate circumstances they both found themselves in, Deidara couldn't have understood him if his life depended on it. Sasori tried to pull him off, but he clung to him, making sure he got the point across.

The Iwa-nin finally let go, though, when his partner managed to detach his arms from his neck. Deidara sunk down, only now aware that he was sitting in Sasori's lap. He glanced over, and found Hidan dying from oxygen deprivation from laughing so hard, but then the Rain Lord was in a similar situation. *Oh, so the Rain guy is still here...* he thought, frowning mentally. That meant that he still had to act.

"Oh, Daisya-sama, you *know* how I like to be woken up like *that*..." He giggled coyly, though on the inside he was just wondering when he could get his hands on some mouthwash. "I'm sorry, did I interrupt something?"

"Oshiro-sama and I were just discussing how impolite it was of you to fall asleep during our meeting." Sasori deadpanned through gritted teeth. "I think it would be wise for you to return to our room to get some sleep, Ishiko-chan."

The Rain Lord abruptly stopped laughing but didn't say anything. That alone was damning—for all of them. Deidara gingerly stood up, his legs stiff from kneeling on them for so long. He bowed to the three men, but Sasori caught his wrist as he turned to leave. The wanna-be Lord yanked him back down to his level, and turned to plant a peck on his cheek.

But instead, for what appeared to be another kiss, Sasori just hissed, "Find Konan. Tell her to find the scroll." He then released his partner, smiling pleasantly. "Have a nice nap, Ishiko-chan."

The Iwa-nin nodded, unsure of exactly *how* he was supposed to find the woman. He departed hastily. He also didn't miss the glare Oshiro had sent Sasori. *Things are getting tense*, he noted, closing the door silently behind him.

Deidara sighed in relief once he was out of sight of anyone who he couldn't trust. Thinking on that, he almost laughed; was there anyone he *could* trust nowadays? He looked around curiously, wondering something along the lines of '*what now*'. He knew next to nothing of the building's layout, and from what the Hyuuga had said that first day, the palace was nothing short of monstrous in size. Konan could be anywhere.

He turned on his heel and impulsively decided to head left, in the opposite direction of their room. *So... look for Konan time. I hope Bya-chan is still with her. ...But not Itachi. Man I hate that guy.* The blonde grimaced, crossing his arms over his breasts. *The sooner I can find them and we find that damned scroll, the sooner I get rid of these things and I can return to normalcy.*

He came to an intersection of corridors, and stopped dead in the middle of them. Which way now? None of the other three hallways coughed up any answers, and all of them looked the same and completely harmless. *Maybe I can find a bathroom with some mouthwash*, he thought with a twitch. Deidara turned left again, his bare feet making no sound on the thick carpet. The only noise was the steady tinkling of the bells on his anklets, and even those seemed quieter in the absolute silence of the place.

He came to a door on his left, and with a 'what the hell why not' shrug, he grabbed the handle and opened it. It was just what appeared to be a study, with a wall of scrolls on the far side. "Oh yeah... supposed to find a scroll, too, yeah." He muttered, but he seriously doubted that the one they were looking for would be casually thrown into a pile in the room before him.

Deidara continued on, completely lost now. He started humming, trying every door he came across. Surprisingly, there weren't that many. He found a bathroom in the next hallway, and eagerly ransacked it for mouthwash.

Now gargling some of the cleansing liquid, the blue-eyed blonde was standing in front of another door, wondering where he was going to spit. In one hand he still had the bottle, and the other reached forward to open the door. *If there's a trashcan or something in here I'll just spit into that... it's not like anyone'll find it, with all of these stupid rooms*—his thoughts died in his mind, however, when his eyes found the far wall.

The scroll—it had to be *the* scroll, there was no doubt about it—was hanging on the opposite wall, encased in glass. The two ANBU guarding it looked up, startled by his sudden emergence into the room. Deidara spat the mouthwash in his mouth out, bringing his hand up to point in shock at the scroll. He had just managed to *stumble* across the very thing they had been searching for!

"Hey!" One of the ANBU stood up, drawing some sort of sword.

He gave a guilty start, hissing, "*Shit*, yeah."

-.-.-

Hinata stared at the green-eyed girl in front of her. There was something... off here. Instinctively, her Byakugan activated. The girl noticed this and instantly frowned.

But not before the Hyuuga saw the chakra circulating in her system before she suppressed it.

"You—you're a ninja!" Hinata gasped. Itachi looked back at her sharply, and was behind the girl before either of them could react. He slit the girl's throat in one motion, but her *Kage Bunshin* just dissipated in a harmless puff of smoke.

Hinata felt her chakra behind her a split second before the cold metal was pressed to her back. "You're both kunoichi as well, huh?" The girl whispered in amusement. With her Byakugan, she noticed that Konan had noticed the scene and stood up, watching them. Itachi was merely staring at them both with a lidded, solidly black, gaze. "I've never seen eyes like yours before. Are they special, like mine?"

"Haya—" the Uchiha said carefully, making use of her fake name. His eyes shifted to red, and Hinata immediately knew what to do. She squeezed her eyes shut, as she heard him call out, "*Tsukuyomi no jutsu!*"

Why he had chosen to use the Tsukuyomi she had no idea, but her body gave a violent shudder as she heard those words again—even if they were said in his female voice. She cracked open an eye hesitantly. The blade fell away from her back, and she saw the girl's eyes go wide and blank. The green-eyed kunoichi stumbled a step backward, falling forward onto her knees. Hinata turned to face her, crouching down with a questioning look shot in Itachi's direction.

"Seventy-two hours is plenty of time to question her." He replied calmly, though his voice was strained. He rubbed one heel into his eye, wincing as they faded back to black. "She was stubborn..."

"You—You—You're..." The girl stammered, her body trembling forcefully. She looked up at the disguised Konoha-nin, her eyes fading into a darker, duller green from their previous ice-like color.

"She wasn't with that ANBU. She says she's just here for cover from the civil war. She has some sort of eye-based bloodline limit... but I have no idea as to what it may be." Itachi said, his voice growing fainter as he continued his explanation. "She planned on assassinating the Rain Lord as well, though much later than when we were... I shouldn't have used the *Tsukuyomi*..." Hinata turned in alarm as he pitched forward, his illusion disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Girls started screaming at the sudden intruder in their midst, and Konan rushed over to see what was going on. She took one look at Itachi's limp body, now supported by a nearly-panicking heiress, and stated, "We need to fix this."

Hinata nodded fretfully, hoisting him up a bit higher. The green-eyed girl was still shaking, clinging to her own shoulders with a desperate grip. Hinata winced in sympathy; she knew Itachi's methods. "She-She's a kunoichi, too." She nodded over toward her, keeping her Byakugan active.

The girl's chakra system was going into shock, meaning she was probably about to pass out. "Itachi-senpai used the *Tsukuyomi* on her to question her motives and the strain was too much for him and he was forced to drop the illusion!"

"Alright, calm down, Hinata-san." Konan smiled vaguely, and made a hand sign. All of the doors to the massive room slammed shut, and the girls inside started screaming more hysterically.

"They're ninja!"

"Shinobi!"

"Shinobi in the palace, shinobi in the palace!"

"Oh gods, they're going to kill us all!"

Hinata bit her bottom lip, trying not to join the screaming. This was *definitely* a mistake; the leader wouldn't be pleased. If, of course, they managed to even continue the mission. Konan stood up, and made another quick set of seals. "I'm going to go find Sasori. You stay here and calm these girls down. Use genjutsu to make them forget what they've just seen, and tend to Itachi." With those orders, her body simply disappeared into a multitude of papers. Hinata's white eyes widened slightly, especially as each of the papers folded themselves into a small, origami butterfly.

Oh, this isn't good, she thought flatly, looking over to where the unknown kunoichi had just fainted. Hinata took a moment to steel herself, and gently set Itachi down. She then stood up, deactivating her bloodline limit, and glared around at the hysterical concubines around her. "H-Hey!" She shouted, and immediately caught everyone's attention. After a flurry of hand signs, she cast a memory-modifying genjutsu over all of them that she could. It was a basic technique and fairly easy to break, but the main thing here was to avoid utter chaos—plus, they were all civilians, so it should work. Her voice sounding flat and almost echoed, she commanded, *"All of you, calm down. Stay calm. There are no shinobi in the building and you are all safe. You did not just see any ninjutsu or genjutsu at all. You're all very tired and you should go to sleep immediately."*

A few moments after she stopped talking, Hinata was terrified that it wouldn't work. But then, one by one, the women in the room dropped off to a listless doze, and it was completely silent. The navy-haired girl breathed a sigh of relief, then looked at the two unconscious ninja in front of her.

"Who are you..." She muttered under her breath, looking at the other kunoichi's limp form. Her hair was a dark cinnamon brown and her kimono was really quite lovely, but somehow she hadn't noticed that when she was looking at her eyes. *Another eye bloodline limit, eh?*

Hinata then realized that she had nothing better to do than watch the two and wait for some sign from either Konan or Sasori. She could only let her mind wander, and wonder. *Hmm... is this the girl who was the ninja last night? Or are there more in the building? I can't tell... I wonder what she's doing here, and where she's from. She doesn't look that old.*

The minutes ticked by, and since she didn't hear anything that might've been an assassination in progress, she surmised that Konan either didn't catch Sasori, or the situation was being handled. "This is turning out to be a bit tougher than an assassination..." She sighed, and rested her chin on her knees. Her eyes drifted over toward Itachi, who was now back in his all-too-conspicuous Akatsuki uniform. "Poor Itachi-senpai... it must've been hard keeping up that constant chakra usage, huh?" She wiped a lock of his black hair out of his closed eyes.

Then there was a loud thump on the door. Hinata gave a start, and leapt to her feet in a defensive stance. Activating the Byakugan, the Hyuuga noted that someone with chakra was on the other

side of the door, and appeared to be trying to kick it open. She hurried over towards it, keeping wary but reaching out to open it nonetheless.

The door flung open, she was shocked to find a panic-stricken, female Deidara on the other side, clutching what appeared to be a large scroll. "Bya-chan!" He said in a high, nervous voice. "Time to go, yeah!"

She noticed that he was splattered with blood. "Wh-What happened...?!"

"Where's Konan? And Itachi...?" He peered over her shoulder, looking for the offending kunoichi.

"Konan-senpai just left, looking for Sasori! I thought you were supposed to be with him!" She exclaimed, ushering him in and slamming the door behind him. "What's going on?!"

"You know that last scroll we needed before we could assassinate the guy, yeah?" He asked with a guilty grin. She looked down at the scroll in his arms, silently mouthing 'oh'. "Well there were these two ANBU guarding it so I had to kill them and then I took it because I didn't know what else to do. The place is gonna be put on high alert soon, so we have to get the other stuff, kill the Lord and get out of here, yeah!"

"Here, give me that," She took the scroll from him, using a *Henge* to transform it into a bracelet. She then slipped it over the Iwa-nin's wrist, explaining, "Now it won't be as suspicious if we're caught before we can get the others."

"Good thinking—where's Itachi, then, yeah?" She could tell that he was antsy, and he kept shifting from foot to foot nervously. It was either their impending doom or the fact that he had just run into another couple of ANBU; she wasn't sure.

"He... He, um, used the *Tsukuyomi* again and his chakra system couldn't handle the constant strain so he passed out. And, uh, we found another ninja..."

"What?" He asked sharply, turning to face her. "...Well we're royally screwed then!" She shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know how to contact Konan-senpai to let her know that we're ready to finish the mission... otherwise, this could end badly." She led him over to where Itachi and the other girl were lying. "That's the kunoichi we discovered... she's not an ANBU, but she said she was here to kill the Rain Lord as well. She has some sort of eye-based bloodline limit too, but we're not sure exactly what it does."

"What are we supposed to do with her, yeah?" He nudged the unconscious kunoichi with his toe, then turned to poke Itachi a few times. "If he's out of his disguise... can I drop mine as well?" He asked hopefully. Hinata shrugged, unsure of what to say. It probably wasn't wise, but carrying one unconscious Akatsuki member would be just as shocking as having two with her.

"Sure...?"

"Yeah!" In a puff of smoke, Deidara stood in his cloak, grinning broadly. "I never missed being a man so much before! So let's get the Uchiha out of here and look for Konan, right, Bya-chan?"

His plan contradicted Konan's orders, but the circumstances had changed. No doubt she'd have wanted to be notified of the upcoming end of the mission. "F-Fine. Let's go..." Deidara stooped to grab Itachi's arm, hauling him up onto his shoulder in a half-carrying, half-dragging position. *Somehow* managing to not step on any of the sleeping civilians, he made his way toward the door, which had shut again. The Iwa-nin kicked it down with a loud crack as the wood splintered, and

Hinata jumped at the sound.

"Huh. Didn't break when I was coming in, yeah..." She saw his blonde head duck down to inspect the broken door, though his voice betrayed no guilt whatsoever. "Coming, Bya-chan?"

She looked pointedly down at the unconscious girl, but he didn't get the hint. The oblivious shinobi just strutted out into the hallway and out of sight. A bit irked, she sourly thought, *Men*. Hinata sighed loudly, fighting with herself for a brief moment. Bring the girl, or don't...? Which would be the lesser of the evils?

-.-.-

The downfall of the Rain really began when Sasori noticed the origami butterfly that fluttered into the room.

Hidan spotted it as well, and his fuchsia eyes found the muddy brown ones of the puppeteer. The redhead gave a small nod, keeping a calm face and a vacant smile for the Rain Lord. Slowly, the paper danced above their heads, just out of sight of the civilian leader. The two Akatsuki members tried to figure out *what* Konan wanted, that she had desperately interrupted and endangered the meeting. Oshiro just continued talking about the tariffs on the country's imports. Sasori kept nodding and smiling, completely tuning the man out.

Konan's butterfly flit back out of the room, and Hidan had the tact to cough loudly. Sasori pretended to ignore him, until he continued coughing. "Masao-san, why don't you go get a glass of water?" He asked politely, keeping his eyes fixed on the Rain Lord.

The man, oblivious, nodded. "Yes, yes, some water. That sounds like a nasty cough you have there..." He said dismissively.

Hidan, still hacking up a lung, nodded and practically teleported out of the room. The two remaining men kept chatting politically, though Sasori's mind was now what had to be happening just outside the door. *What is so urgent that Konan would risk a butterfly?* he kept asking himself, over and over. ...*What did Deidara do now...?*

-.-.-

Hidan hadn't seen Konan's origami technique before, but he wasn't quite as stupid as many of the other members thought. He saw the way Sasori's expression changed when he noticed the butterfly, and figured he had better investigate. Seeing the blunette appear in a whirl of papers, however, wasn't quite what he was expecting. "What the fucking hell was *that*?!"

"Kindly shut up, Hidan-san." She replied pleasantly. "I regret to inform you that I've come with... news."

"Like the fact that you can turn into Jashin-damn *paper*?" He demanded. Konan shot him a glare, and he dropped the subject of her jutsu. "So... uh... what news...?" He asked, looking away. *Shit, that woman can be scary when she wants to be*, he thought sourly.

"There is an enemy shinobi, we have captured her, Itachi-san is unconscious, and Hinata-san was put in charge of soothing a room full of hysterical women." The woman summed up curtly. The immortal only gaped at her.

"There's a—the Uchiha managed to—you *put the bitch in charge of those whores*? Okay, let me get this straight. There's some kunoichi bitch that you guys caught, but somehow she managed to knock out Itachi? And then why the hell were there hysterical women?!"

"Well, when *you* are out cold, do any *Henges* you wear stay on?" She asked rhetorically. He just shook his head, running a hand through his pale hair in disbelief. "...Where was Deidara-san?"

"Uhh..." Hidan paused to allow himself a well-deserved snicker at his ally's expense, "Didn't he find you? Sasori, um, sent him after you after he fell asleep and... you'll have to ask Sasori the full details."

Konan didn't look amused. "I haven't seen him. Are you saying he's roaming the halls, *alone*?"

"...Yeah?" Looking at it like *that*, he could see that they really hadn't thought that through. "There wasn't any other way to contact you." He hissed, almost defensively.

"There is always a way. You're just... unaware of them." She replied enigmatically.

Their conversation was cut short, however, by the sudden arrival of the very artist they were just conversing about. The very *male* artist. Konan and Hidan both stared at Deidara, who had just now realized that, as he rounded the corner carrying an unconscious Uchiha, and appeared to have been in mid-step as he froze.

"...What the shit are you doing?" Hidan asked in a flat tone.

"Why are you in *uniform*?" Konan added, her own voice a low, dangerous growl.

Deidara didn't say anything for a moment. Then he looked back over his shoulder, and Hinata came into view, carrying some unconscious girl. The Jashinist raised an eyebrow questioningly. Konan's eyes had widened past her usual lidded stare, and Hidan figured that the unconscious chick was probably... something. He didn't know quite what, but something was up here. "Um..." The blonde looked around casually, avoiding the death glares he was receiving. "Well..."

"Well *what*, Deidara-san?" The azure-haired woman asked, deceptively calm. She had regained her usual stoicism, and folded her hands in front of her stomach. Her shoulders were rigid, however, and her body was completely tense. No one dared comment on her stance. "You *know* we're not supposed to do anything until we have that last scroll. Unless, of course, you're planning something or have suddenly had the genius revelation of *betraying* the Akatsuki's goal...?"

"No!" He said immediately, as if on reflex. It caught most of the others off guard. "I mean... no, I wouldn't betray the Akatsuki, yeah..."

The Hyuuga girl hastily interrupted. "W-We aren't betraying anyone...! Deidara-kun has the scroll you need—hold on—" She held up her free hand in the releasing sign, and a bracelet around the Iwa-nin's wrist vanished in a puff of smoke. A large, decorative-looking scroll dropped to the ground.

Hidan swore, eyes glued to the scroll.

But then, as quickly as his disbelief and anger had come—it disappeared completely. Because he was suddenly hit with the eye-opening revelation that *they were free of the mission*. They had

everything they needed. Two scrolls, one kunai and one wall hanging, and the pillaging could happen later.

All they needed to do was take care of one very annoying Rain Lord now.

"You... when... *where*?" Konan didn't appear to be daring to breathe. Her eyes slowly glided up from the paper to Deidara's face.

"Well, Sasori-danna sent me out to find *you*," He gave Hidan an odd look when he didn't laugh, but continued smoothly, "And I sort of got lost. I went into one room and there were two ANBU and this scroll, yeah. I killed them, got the scroll, and then found Bya-chan with the Uchiha and that chick who she says is a kunoichi."

"There were *two more* ANBU?" She asked, obviously alarmed by this new bit of information.

"That means... the Lord must have been on to us." The other three shifted uncomfortably, unsure of how to handle the declaration. Did they start going hysterical, did they run, did they shrug it off like nothing...? "Hidan-san, it appears that we have the sudden, urgent need to assassinate a Rain Lord."

The masochist's face broke into a broad, rather feral, grin. With a seal and a puff of smoke, his rosary was replaced with his traditional scythe, which he flipped around his wrist to loop the end of the rope around his arm. He swung it in a wide arc, balancing it on the back of his shoulder. "Fuck yeah. 'Bout time."

He practically skipped back down the hall towards the meeting room, all the while swinging his scythe cheerfully. Hidan heard Konan order the Hyuuga to stay back to watch Itachi (*and hopefully wake the lazy bastard up*, he thought), and soon both the blunette and Deidara were following him back to the unsuspecting Rain Lord. He took a flying kick at the door, shattering it.

Shinobi reflexes kicked in before Oshiro could react.

Sasori had probably felt their chakra signatures approaching, and had jumped up to get dibs on the Rain Lord before Hidan had even entered the room. The redhead whipped a katana out of his sleeve, though *where* it had been was beyond human comprehension, it seemed. "Hey! No fair!" The Jashinist shouted, taking a swing at both Sasori and the Rain Lord.

The puppet master glowered. "I got to the man first, and since *I* was the one who had to put up with him the most, I think I should have the honor of killing him."

"Wh-What?" Oshiro spluttered, keeping himself rigidly away from the katana's tip.

"I was in just as many meetings as you, asshat!" Hidan snarled, jumping over the table to try to get another swing. Sasori ducked, dragging the Rain Lord down under the scythe's blades as well. The pair continued on like that, bickering, until Konan cleared her throat loudly.

It was almost like it was a cue of some sort.

The Rain Lord disappeared in a puff of smoke, a *Kawarimi*, with a very surprised Deidara. The Akatsuki members looked up just in time to see the real Rain Lord disappearing with a pair of ANBU out the door.

The chase had begun.

Hinata was just waking Itachi up when she got the fright of her life. Two ANBU members, escorting Oshiro, darted around the corner and came to a complete stop right in front of them. A hare-masked woman forced the Lord to the ground as she rolled over to aim a kick upwards, just in time to catch Deidara, who had been hot on their tail, in the stomach with her heel. Hinata's white eyes widened as he flew backward into Sasori, just as he, Konan and Hidan came around the corner as well. Hidan had his scythe out already, and Konan looked angry enough to kill.

Itachi stood up shakily, his chakra still drained. The Uchiha put a hand on the nearest wall for support, glaring daggers at the target and two ANBU. "This place has gone to hell while I've been out..." He muttered under his breath, sighing.

"You shouldn't be standing—let them take care of the Rain Lord." The heiress tugged on his sleeve to try—in vain—to get him to sit back down. "Your chakra is exhausted and you shouldn't be fighting *anyone* right now."

"My chakra is exhausted by *your* standards. I follow the Akatsuki's standards." He replied coldly, standing up straighter.

One of the ANBU whistled loudly, just before Hidan decapitated her with his sickle. Her head rolled down the hall, the mask coming off and falling in front of Hinata's feet. She resisted the urge to gag, stepping backward to avoid the blood splattering her sandals.

"Shit! The whistle—it's a signal!" Sasori shouted as he grabbed the Rain Lord by his shirt front. "You. Why are there ANBU from different nations in your palace?!"

Oshiro grinned, obviously already figuring out that he was going to die—either that, or he thought he had an ace up his sleeve. "Do you really think I would be stupid enough not to hire some shinobi bodyguards?"

Deidara pushed his partner out of the way, punching the Rain Lord in the jaw as he did so. "*Why the hell are there Iwa ANBU?! Ame and Iwa hate each other, yeah!*" The blonde snarled, pulling back his fist for another punch. "What kind of sick game are you playing?!"

Konan looked up at his outburst, wiping the blood of the second ANBU off on her cloak. She didn't notice another ANBU appear out of her shadow, jumping up with a kunai to—

"Look out!" Hinata shouted, drawing the woman's attention. She didn't have time to do anything more, as the kunai dug itself into her neck, and blood spurted out as she fell—and disintegrated in a whirl of papers. The Hyuuga's jaw dropped, especially as Konan reformed herself behind the surprised ANBU. She took care of the man with a quick swipe of her own kunai.

"Thank you, Hinata-san." Konan replied primly, though Hinata didn't quite feel like she needed to be thanked.

More and more ANBU started coming, and the scene was quickly degrading into pure chaos. Hinata was desperately restraining Itachi, who was too worn out to fight. Deidara, who had a similar drained chakra system, looked like he was running on pure hatred for the Iwa ANBU. Hidan was delightfully hacking away at anything that came within range and was soaked in blood soon enough. Konan danced in between the fighters, slashing away carefully and accurately at the shinobi as she went. Sasori was pulling weapons out of thin air as he fought, it seemed.

Then Hinata felt a foreign chakra stir behind her—the green-eyed kunoichi. She got to her knees shakily, her brown hair hanging into and shielding her eyes from view. "You... are Akatsuki..." She mumbled. Itachi ignored her, but used her sudden waking to his own advantage; he yanked his arm out of Hinata's grasp, and darted off to join the fray.

The Hyuuga walked calmly over to her. She may not be able to do a thing about ANBU, but she could take care of one weakened kunoichi, no matter the rank. She forced her Byakugan on again, gathering chakra into her palms to sever the chakra from her heart. Quick, nearly effortless killing.

The girl looked up into Hinata's eyes, and for a moment she faltered. Her eyes weren't the glittering, ice-like green from before—they were dull and lifeless. "Akatsuki?" The girl repeated, almost hopefully.

"Yes." Hinata replied simply, pulling her hand back for the finishing strike.

"...Good.." The kunoichi smiled, closing her eyes. This completely threw the Konoha-nin off guard. It took her a moment, but then she noticed the girl use a *Shunshin* to appear behind her, her head and one arm directly in the Byakugan's blind spot. "The base of your neck is unguarded." The girl said seriously, her voice much stronger than before.

It took Hinata a long moment to work out what to do. But then she whirled around, ducking under the first strike and sidestepping the second. The girl doggedly followed her movements, easily sliding under her guard, no matter how fast the Hyuuga thought she was. Hinata jumped backwards to avoid a kunai aimed at her stomach, but the green-eyed girl's eyes were glittering now, and she followed with all of the speed of the ANBU surrounding them.

"*Kaiten*!" The move was mostly a reflex, but it got the girl off her back. Hinata ran for it the second she stopped spinning, ignoring the enemy kunoichi's startled expression. The navy-haired Konoha-nin glanced back over her shoulder to check if she was being followed—unfortunately, she was.

With an 'oof', she collided with someone. The Hyuuga fell backward from the force of the impact, falling just under the surprised green-eyed girl's fist. Hinata felt a hand plant itself on her shoulder, using her as a push-off for a rather well-aimed kick. The other girl went flying back, Itachi chasing after her with a determined look in his Sharingan.

Hinata was surprised that the Uchiha would've saved her, though she easily chalked it up to him having a score to settle with the girl. She was now free, however, and had no idea what to do—she couldn't take on that girl, let alone an ANBU. She was only a chuunin, for gods' sake!

But a sudden explosion interrupted the scene quite thoroughly.

Deidara put his hands up, backing up innocently. Everyone else had frozen, the Akatsuki members wondering if Deidara had caused it, and the ANBU members wondering *what* had caused it. The answer became clear with the smoke, however, when two massive forms stepped out into the wrecked hallway.

"How dare you assholes start killing without informing *us*?" Kakuzu demanded, crossing his arms.

"Aww, Itachi-san, looks like you guys already got all the good ones." Kisame added, hefting his sword onto his shoulder. The Kiri missing-nin stepped delicately over a fallen body, grinning toothily at his partner.

Deidara, however, looked extremely put-out. "How did you—"

"We are *trying* to complete a mission here!" Konan cut him off, glowering at them all. "Half of the Rain's forces must be on their way here, and *we* aren't the only ones trying to end this. Our mission was to assassinate the Rain Lord *quickly and quietly*."

Properly chastised, the men all scuffed their feet in the dusty carpet. Hidan hurriedly decapitated the nearest ANBU member, bringing their numbers down to a measly few—and the green-eyed girl. Said kunoichi looked around a bit, and backed into the nearest doorway, evidently trying for a hasty retreat. Itachi followed her doggedly, much to her distress.

"Then you take care of these poor bastards, and I'm going to go see how much gold the old guy owned." Kakuzu gave them all a wave, turning to leave. Sasori stopped him, however, with a glare that could peel paint. Kakuzu had the nerve to look affronted as he turned to look over his shoulder for someone's support. No one gave it.

"Once everyone is dead, then you can steal to your many hearts' content. Until then, the highest priority is that no one escapes this building alive who isn't affiliated with the Akatsuki." said Sasori in a low voice. The taller shinobi just shrugged, and did an abrupt about-face.

"Everyone out of the way." He said in a bored tone, making hand signs. He then brought his stitched hand to his mouth, exhaling a ball of fire. Upon contact with the air, the flames promptly, for lack of better description, *exploded*.

--.-

Deidara found himself in another room, coming up out of the *Doton* he had used to escape the sudden burst of flames. He knew an explosion when he saw one. He could only hope that the Hyuuga—and Sasori, even—got out of the way in time. "Stupid Kakuzu, stealing my art, he doesn't even *appreciate* it, yeah..." The blonde grumbled, climbing over broken desks and chairs to get back out into the hallway. He could hear someone—a female—screaming, so he assumed at least Konan survived. And whoever was unlucky enough to be the one being screamed at.

Rubbing dust out of his eyes, Deidara stumbled back into the corridor. Everyone else was either singed, bloody, dusty, or, in Hidan's case, skewered on a fallen beam. Sasori just shook dust out of his hair, otherwise completely unmarked. The Iwa-nin was more than a bit jealous of his partner right then; *how* could the man be so *invincible*?

Konan was busy shouting Kakuzu's ear off, something about how paper is a highly flammable substance. Hidan was pulling himself off of the wood, all the while grouching about the splinters. The two Konoha-nin were nowhere in sight. "Hey, where's Bya-chan, yeah?" He asked loudly, coughing a bit.

"Your little pet followed Itachi who followed that other bitch." The Jashinist supplied helpfully, pointing down the hall. "I dunno whether or not she got through that blast that my DUMBASS PARTNER WAS STUPID ENOUGH TO SET OFF." The last part was directed at Kakuzu.

Of course, the taller immortal just flicked him off and replied, "I *told* you to get out of the way. Consider it another test of your reflexes, newbie."

"I ain't the newbie no more!" Hidan bawled, searching frantically for his scythe. "Oh just wait until I get some of your blood, you fuckin' bastard, you are *so* Jashin-damn dead then..."

"Kakuzu, Hidan, be quiet!" Konan snarled, rubbing her temples. "You are giving me a headache with all of your whining. Sasori, gather up the bodies and count them. Deidara, you help him. Kisame, go find Itachi and Hinata. Kakuzu, Hidan, kindly shut your loud mouths and go loot the place. Keep the necessary things with you." The blunette ordered.

Deidara, though the last thing he wanted to do right then was handle carcasses and work anywhere near Sasori, meekly followed the demands. The woman definitely wasn't in a mood to be trifled with. The blonde situated himself so that Sasori was between him and Konan, just in case.

But after a few minutes, to make sure that the men were following her instructions, the kunoichi disappeared in a whirl of papers. Kisame had disappeared the second she gave him the order—probably a wise move—and Kakuzu and Hidan were arguing loudly down the hall. Deidara found himself alone with Sasori, for the first time in nearly a month.

"You're staring." Sasori deadpanned, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

"No I'm not, yeah!" The Iwa-nin instantly denied the charge. Instead he turned to the nearest body, and hauled it up over his shoulder, carrying it to the pile. He removed the mask and put that in another pile; it was easier to count masks than corpses.

After a few moments, the redhead stated, "...Here, I'll move the bodies, you just count the masks. You're pathetically weak, you know that?"

Deidara stuck his tongue out at him. "I'm as strong as a shinobi my age should be. You're just a freak, yeah." Just to spite his partner, he marched over and picked up the biggest body he could find. Of course, he ended up more dragging than carrying it.

So he was very surprised when something wrapped around the carcass's torso, lifting it into the air almost effortlessly. Deidara's head snapped back to look at Sasori. The Suna artist just raised an eyebrow, the cable coming out of his sleeve and following seemingly no verbal or physical direction. "You're still too slow, brat."

"We don't have a time limit, yeah." He replied automatically, but his eyes were still on that cable. "What is that?"

"A long metal cord." The redhead gave him a small grin, withdrawing it back into his cloak with a *shhhhhh*. "Now how many casualties has the Rain experienced?"

"That wasn't what I meant, Sasori-danna." Deidara sniffed, wiping his nose on his sleeve. The dust was starting to irritate him. Of *course* he hadn't been counting, as he was more fascinated with his partner. Hastily he started numbering off the masks. "Where do you get all of those inane weapons of yours, yeah?"

"My weapons are far from *inane*—and you're one to talk, anyway. The only inane thing here is you and your 'art'." They were starting to slip back into their regular argumentative natures, all lingering thoughts of that horrid kiss nearly forgotten. Their relationship was again just as happily strained and tense as it had always been.

That was, until Konan came back, ordering them out of the half-destroyed building. Deidara protested hotly, stating that he wasn't going anywhere without the dark-haired girl. Konan replied by informing him that she—and Itachi, unfortunately—were both outside waiting for them. Then the Iwa-nin was more than happy to leave the burning piles of rubble and carcasses.

Once outside, however, Deidara changed his mind about that.

It was eerie out. There was no other word to describe it. The sound of flames and the occasional rumble of a falling beam were completely eradicated, and it was practically silent. Everyone else was already outside, in various states of disarray and health. The trees surrounding the mansion, already sparsely placed, tall and skinny, were surrounded by a thin mist. Deidara's bare feet didn't make any more sound to disrupt the unnatural scene.

Itachi was holding a crying girl by her brown hair, pointing her face down at the ground. The Hyuuga stood beside him, holding her bleeding shoulder. The blonde instantly made his way to stand beside her, looping a concerned arm around her shoulders. "It's cold..." She murmured, leaning against him a bit. Up close, he noticed that she was hurt more than anyone else (with good reason, of course).

With a jolt, Deidara realized something. "...It's not *raining*..."

Konan wiped a lock of hair out of her eyes, smiling at him. She and the other girl were still in their kimonos, but it didn't exactly ruin the effect. "It means... Pein has won. The Land of Rain is now under Akatsuki control."

"And how the fuck do you know that?" Hidan demanded loudly, visibly unnerved by her proclamation. "Killing a civilian Lord wouldn't do any such thing."

"We were only here to be a distraction and to take out a pawn. Pein was sent to kill Hanzou while we were on this mission. Since it's not raining... it means he won." The woman said softly. At the end of her sentence, however, a light mist began to fall. Within minutes, it was a sprinkle of rain, and before Hidan could point this out, it was getting stronger.

"Yeah, looks like it ain't raining." He muttered. Even if it proved him right, the Jashinist didn't exactly look pleased at the sudden soaking they all received. Deidara snorted, pulling his uniform off to wrap around the dark-haired kunoichi's shoulders. Sasori gave him a dirty look, but didn't say anything.

The brunette in Itachi's grasp, however, suddenly gave a small jerk and looked up to the sky between the treetops. Her eyes were still watery, but now her expression was one of sheer awe. The Uchiha merely narrowed his eyes a bit, but did nothing else. Most of the other members were looking pointedly at her now, silently asking for an explanation to her presence, but Itachi didn't say anything.

They were interrupted, however, when three figures appeared in the rain, near the mansion's gate. All eyes turned to them, but no one tensed. As they neared, two were visibly taller than the one in the middle, but he (for it was apparent that they were all male by now) appeared to be leading the other two.

Deidara mostly ignored whoever it was. He was still thinking about Konan's words—and what they implied. *Every* shinobi of the day had heard of Hanzou, the leader of the Rain. Though he wasn't a Kage, he was still formidable. It was said that even the great Sannin of Konoha hadn't defeated him working *together*. Whoever this 'Pein' guy was *defeated* him? Just like that? The Hyuuga girl beside him looked equally confused, though her white eyes were on the three approaching men.

Eventually, two of the figures were recognizable. Zetsu and Tobi, soaked and looking worse for wear, the latter limping slightly. Between them, however, was a spiky redheaded man—even though his hair was more *orange*—that Deidara hadn't ever seen. *Must be this 'Pein' guy...*

Konan bowed slightly when they came up to them. Sasori and Kakuzu did as well, though no one

else moved. The man had the strangest eyes, too—grey with a bunch of circles in them. Deidara must have made some sort of face, because Sasori elbowed him sharply in the side a moment later.

"How did it go?" Konan asked quietly, folding her hands in front of her stomach. Zetsu rolled his eyes, otherwise keeping quiet.

"It went as well as can be expected." The ginger-haired man replied carelessly, glancing over the state of the other Akatsuki members. Unlike Zetsu and Tobi, he only had minimal injuries. *Very* minimal. *Amazingly* minimal.

"As was expected..." She echoed, stepping aside for him to address the group at large.

And address them he did. Though shorter than both Tobi and Zetsu, the man wasn't short. In fact, he was quite tall, but even so, his presence was just... *dominating*. Not to mention all of his piercings. Those were just creepy. But the more he stared at him, the more Deidara was beginning to suspect something...

"I come to you today bearing news of the Rain's downfall. Hanzou is dead—and Oshiro is dead. The Land of Rain is now entirely in the Akatsuki's grasp, and all opposition to us that remains will be exterminated soon. The plan is coming to fruition and the Akatsuki now has its own country to be its stronghold." The second he heard the man's voice, Deidara's jaw dropped. He *knew* that voice...

Hidan, apparently, likewise recognized it. Itachi and Kisame both appeared somewhat surprised, though they masked it a bit better.

The man called Pein just surveyed them all dispassionately. His grey eyes glanced at each in turn, lingering slightly on the crying brown-haired girl. "...And who is this, Konan?"

"A kunoichi we found in the palace, likewise undercover to assassinate the Rain Lord. We have yet to extract a name, but she has a bloodline limit and her loyalties are unknown." The azure-haired woman told him. He stepped over toward her, and Itachi dragged her to her feet. She wobbled slightly, completely unsure of what to do or say.

"What's your name?" He asked emotionlessly. Deidara resisted the urge to frown; this man was more stoic than Itachi...

"Is—Is it true?" The girl asked instead, her green eyes wide. For a moment, they flashed a clear, ice-like color, then resumed their normal dark, dull coloration. She then fell to her knees in front of him, staring up at him with an awed look. "You... you have no weaknesses!"

"So *that's* what she sees..." Itachi muttered audibly, grimacing.

"It's true that I have done many things. Be more specific." Pein didn't seem overly worried that she hadn't answered his question, and in fact now looked a bit interested in her own queries.

"You defeated Hanzou?!" She breathed, clasping her hands in front of her chest. "Did you... did you *really*?" Strangely, she sounded actually relieved at this revelation.

"Yes. I did." He replied simply.

"..." For a long moment, the girl did not speak. Then she ducked her head, shouting, "Thank you, thank you! You've saved us, you've saved the Rain, Pein-sama!"

He smiled. And when he smiled, it wasn't exactly flattering—frankly, it *scared* Deidara. He now

fully suspected this man of being the leader of the organization, and it was an unnerving thought.

"Konan, we will need a new Rain Lord, one who can defend himself against an assassination attempt without needless ninja guards." Pein said loudly, his eyes still on the girl at his feet. "I think this woman will do."

The brunette's head jerked up, eyes wide and ice-like again. "Th-Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She seemed unsure of what else to say. "Praise you, Pein-sama!"

"Keep saying that. Spread the word." He commanded with another one of his sinister smiles. Then Pein turned back to Konan, saying, "We will have to track down any remaining rebels in the country. I'll leave that up to our new Rain Lord—you and Zetsu can help her. I want every last one of them eradicated."

"Wait, wait, *wait*." Hidan interrupted, and Pein's eyes flashed dangerously as he turned to him. "You come in here, order us around, appoint this little bitch as the new Rain Lord—and say that you've defeated the legendary Hanzou with a team of *three*? I know we're Akatsuki and everything, but isn't that a bit *much*?"

"Zetsu and Tobi didn't help me. They were on their own mission. I defeated Hanzou myself." The man replied coldly. The silver-haired immortal paled considerably, shutting his mouth. "I'd keep quiet in the presence of your leader, Hidan."

"So... you're really him, yeah?" Deidara was unable to resist adding. He needed a straight answer!

"Yes." Pein grinned once more. "Welcome to the new regime of the Rain. Led by Pein-sama, Leader of the famed and feared Akatsuki."

As they left, Deidara could only think how similar it was to five months ago, when he was welcomed into the organization. This whole thing was *eerie*.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Well, the Rain has officially ended its civil war-with the Akatsuki winning! The Leader is finally revealed to the younger members, and a new Rain Lord has already been appointed who sympathizes with the infamous organization! But now, Deidara will be forcibly reminded of his time limit on training for the repeat of the Sand to capture Gaara. And what's this? Something about a race?

Under The Clouds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neji would be damned if he let Sasuke get ahead of him. But likewise it seemed Sasuke would be damned if he let Neji beat him

Juugo, that giant of a man, had rejected Neji's offer to track Itachi in favor of their other choice—much to Suigetsu's dismay. The Hyuuga had made a note to find out who they were recruiting that he would prefer Neji to him. But the fact of the matter was that Neji was once again on his own, following Sasuke just because he knew that he could keep up with him and he would hunt down Itachi like a nin-dog. It was the easiest way to the Akatsuki at the moment.

The Uchiha's team was always just at the edges of his Byakugan, flitting in and out of his vision. He made sure that he stayed that far behind, because although Sasuke knew he was being followed, he was far enough away that he couldn't do a thing about it without a full blown fight. And for some reason, the arrogant missing-nin didn't want that. (Neji wasn't complaining.)

But lately Sasuke had been traveling faster, as if he had a renewed purpose. The only logical reason Neji ever came up with was that they'd gotten a tip-off as to where his brother may be. (Though he didn't dismiss the idea that they were closing in on their other target: whoever else was to be part of their group.)

Then, suddenly, Neji spotted a foreign chakra coming towards them, aiming for Sasuke's group. Though whoever it was, their path to Sasuke was going to intersect with Neji; whether this was accidental or intentional the Hyuuga didn't know, and he didn't plan on sticking around to find out. He veered off to his left, away from the foreign ninja, keeping his targets in range. The shinobi following him adjusted his course accordingly, and Neji now knew that he had a pursuer.

As far as speed went, they seemed about even. So whoever it was wasn't going to catch him in the current situation. But what worried the jounin was that someone could spot *him*, even at the Byakugan's farthest limits. That was a kilometer away. *Is this their tracker?* He couldn't help thinking, grimacing as he leapt down from a branch onto the ground. Weaving in between trees, Neji sped up, as much as he could manage. The ninja behind him changed course again, this time making a beeline straight for Sasuke's group.

So it was a race.

Neji didn't want it to come to that, naturally, but the only other options were to let whoever it was meet up with his only link to the Akatsuki, or attack whoever it was. The Konoha-nin decided on the second option, using a nearby branch to swing himself around, pushing off of it with his feet and back into the treetops. The added momentum gave him a speed boost, which obviously caught the other ninja off guard. They swerved, trying to avoid him, but he was closing in. Sasuke's position ahead of them was actually helping him; the shinobi couldn't get to the target without circling around and wasting time and energy.

Finally, the other seemed to grasp the futility of continuing to try to outrun him, and changed course to face him. Neji smirked to himself. This would be easy. With this tracker out of the way, they would have no choice but to turn to the Hyuuga for help tracking down Itachi.

When the other ninja got into actual sight, however, he wasn't exactly what Neji expected.

For one, he was a she.

Neji halted himself on a tree, frowning (though more in shock than dismay). The kunoichi standing across the clearing obviously knew where he was as well, but she didn't make any moves toward him. Instead, she just wiped a long lock of her bright red hair off of her shoulder, glaring at him.

"Who the hell are you, and *what* do you want?!" She demanded quite rudely, pushing her glasses up on her nose. She placed her other hand on her hip, still glaring daggers at him. "What are you trying to do here?!"

She has quite the temper, he noted, wondering if he should try to use that to his advantage. Instead Neji cleared his throat. "I am a fellow Konoha ninja, an old ally of Sasuke's. And I assume you are heading up to meet with him, and you are the tracker he was talking about."

The woman obviously hadn't expected him to know anything about Sasuke, even if it would have been evident that he had been following him. She closed her mouth, seemingly at a loss for words. Then, finally, she resumed sneering at him, replying, "Damn straight. Sasuke-kun and I are a *team*." The way she emphasized the last word gave him the impression that she had a different definition of team than he.

"Even so, I can't allow you to meet up with him. You're in the way of my plan." The Hyuuga bent low into his traditional *Juuken* stance, focusing his Byakugan on her.

Unfortunately, just as he did that, he noticed Sasuke and the other two change direction suddenly—back towards them. He was forced to widen his gaze again, wondering *why* they were turning around, and whether or not they'd noticed them. The woman seemed likewise distracted by the Uchiha's sudden alteration in route.

"Looks like it won't matter whether or not your plans work out with me. Juugo must've spotted me and now they're coming back here to pick me up. There's no way you can take me out before they arrive—even if you *could* take me out. Ha!" She laughed snidely, crossing her arms over her chest. Regrettably she had a point. Neji had no idea what her skill level was, but if she was strong enough to be noticed by Uchiha Sasuke, she probably wouldn't be an easy kill.

Time to change tactics. Neji hated doing such a thing, but drastic times called for drastic measures. "Kunoichi-san, I won't attack you and save us both the trouble. But could you just tell me one thing?"

"The name is Karin." She snapped, narrowing her eyes suspiciously behind her glasses. "...And what do you want to know?"

"*How* do you track? And how far is the range in which you can track someone?" Sasuke and the other two were closing in, so he had to get this information quickly.

"I track by sensing chakra, of course," She replied as if it were the most obvious thing ever. Then, with a sly grin, she said, "And I can sense people for a few good kilometers."

"How far?" He repeated urgently, tired of her games.

"Fifteen kilometer radius, from where I am standing now. I am the best chakra tracker in the world, and there's no way you could beat me with just your eyes."

Neji remained quiet, the only thought running through his head being *So she knows I'm a Hyuuga...*

"Sasuke-kun is coming." Karin said sweetly, a vivid blush rising into her cheeks. "He isn't going to be happy with you, is he?"

"He won't be happy, but he won't dare stop me." His eyes drifted down to his feet, and unconsciously he balled his hands into fists. "I'm not interested in stopping or hindering him in his quest for vengeance. It's none of my concern. I just... I just want Hinata back. Please," Neji turned back up to face the redheaded tracker, the three ninja coming ever closer in his Byakugan's peripheral vision, desperation slipping into his voice. "Please, if you see a Hyuuga girl, with long, dark blue hair and a permanent blush, *please* don't harm her."

Karin seemed taken aback by the request, and more importantly, his sincerity. Neji knew as a shinobi that such desperate emotions were some of the strongest tools one could have, but he also knew that it was *true*. He just wanted his cousin back, back from the Akatsuki. It was an insane appeal to a total stranger, a rival no less, but he felt the need to do so. Maybe she could feel a small stab of compassion. Because if Hinata was found in the presence of Itachi when Sasuke finally caught up...

...She would undoubtedly die.

Neji stared levelly at the woman, and she stared back at him. Her face was a complete mask. But then, so slowly, she nodded.

Then Sasuke, Suigetsu and Juugo burst into the clearing, and the Konoha jounin was heading in the opposite direction as fast as he could. With his all-seeing eyes, Neji saw Suigetsu and Karin immediately get into an argument, but Sasuke's Sharingan were on the exact spot that the Hyuuga had departed from.

Admittedly, the Rain had much better living arrangements than they had been in previously. Not to say it was perfect—it was far from it. For example, hiding Iwa-nin couldn't hide in the stone any more. And wood and plaster were much less durable than that same stone.

And it always rained.

Of course, it had its moments, as living in the Akatsuki tended to do. Such as the actual process of moving their things. It became almost a game to see how many things someone could hold at any given point, though Kakuzu and Sasori quickly trumped most of the others due to their enhanced strength. (At one point, Kakuzu was managing to lift his bed, his desk, all of his papers and money, the two females and Hidan. And carried them all the way out of the hideout. His streak ended, however, when Deidara and Sasori conspired to trip him.) Moving into their very own country gave everyone's mood a lift.

It was still somewhat unnerving to see the Leader at any given point without his shadows to mask him, but the younger members soon enough got used to the sight.

What was even weirder, however, were the civilians of the Rain. They were strong, durable people and ninja, but their population was small and tired due to the ongoing war. Moreover, they were scared and unsure of these new leaders of their country. Every time an Akatsuki member was seen in uniform, they were hastily bowed to and then avoided at all costs. It had gotten so bad that

several had taken to leaving their cloaks in their room when going out for personal reasons.

Rumors were spreading like wildfire, too. Pein was moving up the ranks in the public's collective eye. First he was some ninja, then an Akatsuki member, then he was the Akatsuki's leader. But it didn't stop there, oh, no. He was their savior, their redeemer... their *god*.

It created tension in the ranks, though no one would admit to it. Pein, of course, was soaking it up like a sponge. He was seen regularly giving speeches to groups of people or giving laws to Konan to put into motion with the Rain Lord.

Deidara didn't particularly like all of the sudden changes in the Akatsuki. He hadn't thought it would be this... fluctuating. He was of course expecting some instability, because it *was* a group of S-ranked missing-nin. But what he wasn't expecting was the severe instability at the beginning, and now this placid solidity that living in Amegakure brought about. His Hyuuga partner, on the other hand, was loving it.

Her spirits had increased drastically, even when Itachi worked her like a dog or Sasori shouted at her. She was constantly cheerful, helping any of the other members willingly and always with a smile on her face. She had even taken to cooking for a lot of them. It seemed that having a stable 'home' environment was just what she needed after all of her previous stress.

The oddest thing, above all else, was that it really was becoming a *home*. When they weren't on missions, or just out on the town, the members chatted, joked, and started to treat each other as a bit more than allies or comrades. They shared stories, battles, missions gone awry. They sparred. They pulled pranks on each other. It was an almost feeble attempt to lighten the mood of the whole organization, but it made the place feel much more... humane.

Of course, mostly it just meant that Deidara had an audience when he had to do his running. (Now it was around the entire city of Amegakure.)

The track was much more difficult than the normal mountain he was used to, too. There was an uphill part, and the only 'downhill' to balance it out was a sudden cliff. There were trees and puddles and a small lake and there was always the constant rain. Deidara definitely preferred the mountain. At least it was dry.

Sneezing and coughing, he completed his eighth lap, with forty-three seconds over the time limit. Today he was being watched by not only the ever-present Sasori, but embarrassingly enough, the two women, Itachi, and Kisame. The blonde gave them all a dirty look—save the Hyuuga—and flopped down into a puddle at Sasori's feet. "I... I liked... the mountain better... danna, yeah..." He panted, trying not to inhale the rain.

The redhead prodded him with a foot, raising an eyebrow. "The distance around Amegakure is shorter. You've just gotten lazy."

"I don't... see *you*... running that!" He snapped, grabbing Sasori's ankle and trying to throw him off balance. No such luck.

"I could in half the time you run it, I'm sure." He replied dryly, crossing his arms and trying to shake Deidara off.

"L-Leave Deidara-kun alone." The Hyuuga piped up, almost in an irritated tone. Deidara let go of his partner's foot and rolled over, surprised. "He's the only one I ever see doing any sort of training around here, so you have n-no right to talk down like that to him."

"I don't see you running that track, either." Itachi stated dispassionately, turning toward her. She gave a squeak and hid behind Konan and Kisame.

"I-I-I would, b-but you wo-wouldn't want me-me anywhere near y-your speed, w-would you...?" She stuttered, peeking out from behind Konan's shoulder.

"I think your speed could use some work. Who says we wouldn't welcome a bit of out-of-organization competition, eh?" Kisame asked, grinning at her. The meek girl shrunk back, visibly not liking where this was going.

"Hey, hey, leave Bya-chan alone, yeah! You all know that if she even got close to as fast as you you'd get jealous and maim her, anyway." Deidara shouted, glaring at Kisame. He then turned to look back at Sasori, even though he was still sitting at his feet in a puddle. "But as for you, Sasori-danna..."

"You can't goad me into anything, brat." He replied in a deadpan. "You may be able to push other members' buttons, but not mine."

"I think Sasori-san is just scared because Deidara-san's progress is amazing." Konan said lightly, folding her hands in front of her stomach. "I can't remember the last time he ran for anything. Perhaps *he* is the one who is getting lazy?"

Sasori's eyes flashed as his head snapped up to glare at the blunette. Kisame snorted into his hand, trying not to laugh at the obvious attempt at leveling the playing field. "I can't recall the last time *you* didn't use those paper wings of yours, either, Konan-san."

That appeared to have hit home, and the woman narrowed her eyes at him. Itachi, however, stepped in between them, turning to glare at each of them in turn. The Uchiha sighed, saying, "If you two want to race, don't get into a fight about it. Amegakure is still unstable and seeing two Akatsuki members fighting right outside the gates may be the final straw."

"So just race, right? Because Itachi-san doesn't want to upset all of the little civilians?" Kisame ruffled his shorter partner's hair, chuckling.

"Kisame, *you* will be in it as well."

"What? Why?"

"Because you are going to be trying to outrun me. And if I catch you, you can only hope that I'll show you more mercy than I am currently feeling towards you right now." Itachi snarled, glaring sideways up at the Kiri-nin.

Kisame looked taken aback, and more than a bit afraid. "Y-Yeah. Right."

The Hyuuga, meanwhile, was slowly trying to slip away before things either got violent or she got dragged back into the spotlight. Deidara noticed this, and decided to copy the strategic move, inching away from Sasori and towards the gates of the city. Without even looking at him, however, the puppeteer reached out a hand and snagged the back of his collar, keeping him there. "It has been awhile since we've gauged how fast all of the members are. The last time was just after Hidan joined, wasn't it?"

Konan smiled blandly. "A race it is, then. Let's see how the ranking falls this time, shall we, Sasori-san?"

"Oh, yes, let's, Konan." Deidara looked back at Sasori to find him smiling in a way that could only

be described as *demonically*. Deidara *really* wanted to get out of there now.

-.-.-

Hinata had gotten out of the race merely on Pein's good grace and the fact that she wasn't an official member. She could have kissed the man for how grateful she was, especially after hearing the rules he'd been called out to inform them off. (Of course she didn't kiss him; she had a feeling Konan wouldn't like that very much.)

"There will be two races. The first no jutsu or weapons will be allowed. The second you may use any means necessary to get ahead, take out another member, or set a trap. This will test both your speed, your ability to think on your feet, and your ingenuity and creativity in a situation against a skilled opponent." The man stated boredly, examining his painted nails. The leader didn't seem terribly thrilled with the whole idea, except as entertainment. No one questioned why he wasn't participating, and frankly, Hinata thought they all looked a bit glad that he wasn't.

Pein then turned one of his creepy ringed eyes on her, and she cringed. "So, what are you waiting for? Aren't you Deidara's cheerleader or something?" He asked. Hinata had no idea what that entailed, or even that she had been assigned that job. "Go start the race!"

"Y-Yes! Sir!" She squeaked, hurrying over to where the other nine members were standing in a row. The tension was thick between certain pairs, and she had a sneaking suspicion that this wasn't exactly going to be a friendly competition. Taking out a kunai, the heiress raised it above her head, calling, "Ready? Three..."

The group tensed, almost like a coiling spring—or snake.

"Two..."

Hidan elbowed Kakuzu, and the thread-user replied by throwing his partner across the trail and into a tree. Hinata watched silently, eyes wide and trying to resist the urge to run for it now. "You pansy-ass fucker! I'll get you—"

"Just start the race already!" The leader called sourly, interrupting the immortal. "You can take your problems out in the next part!"

"One!" Hinata hastily shouted, dropping the kunai at her feet. There was a rush of wind past her, whipping her hair around her face, and then the nine shinobi were gone. She hesitantly got off of the trail, making sure she was out of the way. It wouldn't take that long for nine highly skilled ninja to complete a lap around Amegakure.

About a minute had passed, and Pein glanced up at the clouds over head, mouthing, "Three... two... one..."

The second he finished 'one', Tobi skidded to a halt in front of them, chest heaving but undoubtedly grinning underneath the mask. Hinata was more than a bit awed that Tobi, of them all, was the fastest, but that was dispelled when a second later, Kakuzu arrived on the scene. Without stopping, he ran up and tackled Tobi to the ground, shouting, "HOW THE HELL DID YOU FINISH BEFORE ME YOU LITTLE MASKED ASS?!"

A moment later, Itachi and Konan arrived in a dead tie, looking mutinous. Konan left the Uchiha,

however, to pull Kakuzu off of Tobi before something bad happened. The remaining members trickled in after that, most of them angry with Tobi for winning. Deidara was equally mad that Tobi, of all of them, beating him, and that he had placed seventh (only in front of Hidan and Zetsu).

"Well that had little entertainment value." The leader deadpanned, crossing his arms. "I hope the next race will be much more fun. Just try not to level my city." He then stared pointedly at Hinata, until she stepped up (avoiding random weapons and strikes thrown at the others) and held a kunai above her head again.

"Three—"

"Two-one-GO!" Hidan finished for her. Instead of starting off running, he just slung his scythe off of his back and swung it around, aiming for Kakuzu but obviously not caring if he decapitated anyone else. Most of the others avoided it, though it managed to embed itself in a tree. Hidan ignored it and left it there, tearing after his partner in a bloody rage.

Deidara likewise had created a clay bird, and was already out of sight. Zetsu and Konan were also nowhere to be seen. The rest of them were steadily disappearing, dodging attacks and throwing jutsus and weapons simultaneously.

It had only been about three seconds before Zetsu appeared out of the ground, stepping up beside Pein with a smirk on both halves of his face. An explosion cut short his gloating, however, already on the opposite side of the city.

"I told them *not* to level my city..." The leader growled dangerously, narrowing his eyes.

"They wouldn't dare harm Amegakure, Leader-sama." Zetsu's white half said complacently. His darker half grinned, though, adding, "*They won't do much, at least.*"

A shadow passed overhead, and Deidara jumped down to the ground. With a dark snicker, he forced his bird back towards the other members, dive-bombing the forest. The resulting explosion demolished more than a few trees, but left the city untouched.

A moment later, Konan appeared in a flurry of paper, two great, angel-like wings sprouting from her back. She landed lightly beside Pein, the papers disappearing back into her shoulders. She didn't look pleased, but she appeared unharmed by either of the explosions. "That was stupid of you, Deidara." She said in a low voice, though her eyes were on the ginger-haired man beside her.

"Eh, whatever. Sasori-danna deserved it." He replied, chuckling darkly. After that rather ominous statement, however, he spotted Hinata and flounced over. Beaming, he asked, "Hey, did you see me, yeah? I'm the second fastest with my art! Sasori-danna is going to be *so* mad that my art beat his... yeah..."

"An-And you're *happy* that he's going to be mad at you...?" She asked. She could understand his joy at finally beating that Suna-nin at his own game, but Deidara's expression was a bit too chipper for that to be the complete story.

"W-Well yeah. Danna and I need to argue more, right?" Curiously, the blonde just gave her a blank look, almost looking embarrassed at her question. Why, however, she had no idea.

Because at that point Sasori arrived, looking slightly scorched and more than slightly livid.

"They're in the Rain." Neji almost gave a start at the sudden voice, but managed to ignore his suddenly racing heart. The *one* time he didn't have his Byakugan active, Sasuke had decided to take matters into his own hands. Typical.

"What?" The Hyuuga asked warily, unsure exactly what the dark-haired avenger was saying to him. As it was, Neji was still laying up against the tree trunk (having taken a slight break to think a few things over), and Sasuke was sitting in the branch directly above him, staring down at him with decidedly black eyes.

"The Akatsuki are in Amegakure, the Land of Rain. Evidently they have taken the whole country over and are now stationed there." The Uchiha repeated dully. He turned his face back upwards, staring at the leaves on the tree.

Neji wasn't going to beat around the bush, however. "Why are you telling me this?" He couldn't quite figure out what Sasuke could gain from sharing this information, unless he wanted him to beat him to Amegakure in a rather vain attempt to draw out his brother. Still, that didn't quite seem like Sasuke's style, no matter how much they despised each other.

"As far as I am concerned, my only target is Itachi. Hinata is a kind girl... and I'm giving you a chance to save her. Even if I'm only going after Itachi, Suigetsu isn't exactly as focused as I, and Juugo has a few... murderous tendencies occasionally. I will give you a week to get Hinata out of there. If you're in our way after seven days, I won't hesitate to kill you as well." With that solemn declaration, Sasuke stood up, and disappeared.

Though he was now alone again, Neji kept his eyes on the branch above him. "...Thank you." He muttered, standing up. No doubt the Uchiha had an ulterior motive to the proposition, but it was an almost kind gesture nonetheless. The Rain was only a few hours from where he was now. A week to rescue to rescue her from the deadliest organization in his generation?

Sure, why not.

Hinata spent the afternoon playing several roles, none of which was even remotely close to that of a princess. Bodyguard, cheerleader, negotiator, barrier, even a Jashinist at one point; she was begging for someone else to keep Sasori away from Deidara, and Hidan had been the closest.

It wasn't exactly a fun afternoon.

The craziest thing, however, was that no matter how many times Sasori caught up to them both (it seemed his bloodlust was spreading to anyone who even *looked* at Deidara), he never really did any harm. Scare the living daylights out of them, yes, but never hurt them. The blonde always seemed to escape, pulling a usually shocked Hyuuga behind him, just in time before certain death.

Until Sasori had gotten the bright idea to separate them.

They'd been about to disappear into Deidara's room and barricade the door with as much clay as possible, when the redhead showed up out of nowhere and effectively sent them both running in different directions. And as if that wasn't frightening enough, he had decided to pursue *Hinata* first.

She was now all the way outside of the city, ignoring the rain and hiding pitifully under a tree branch. Just because the puppeteer hadn't injured them yet definitely didn't mean he wouldn't. If anything, the afternoon-long chase had only added fuel to the fire. Hinata didn't know how long she'd have to hide, but she figured when Deidara or Hidan (he'd taken to being her protector after 'converting' her to his religion) came and found her the coast was probably clear.

The rain was starting to get irritating, however. Her hair had fallen out of its ponytail some time ago, and was now sticking wetly to the back of her neck and her shoulders. She wiped a lock out of her eyes, thoroughly annoyed. Just because Sasori didn't like her and because he was angry with his partner didn't mean he had to take it out on her!

Resolutely, the heiress stood up and squared her shoulders. She would *not* be left out in the rain just because an incensed Suna-nin decided to bully her. And if he would kill her, so be it. At least she would die in the inside of the Akatsuki building, warm and dry.

Just as Hinata turned around, however, someone stepped up to stand in her way. Choking back a scream, she turned and fled, courage fleeing faster than her feet could take her. An iron grip caught her arm, though, and held her there. "Wh-What—"

"Stupid. You're going to get yourself sick if you're in the rain." Itachi stated coldly, yanking her back a few steps. She perked up at the sound of his emotionless voice; *he would save me from Sasori... wouldn't he?*

"Y-Yes, sorry, Itachi-senpai." She smiled meekly as he let her go. "I was just running from—"

"*There* you are!" If one Akatsuki member could find her, logically it led to the statement that any of them could. Sasori leapt down from one of the nearest branches, his brown eyes narrowed and his fists clenched.

Hinata screamed and ran in the opposite direction, letting her teacher deal with the problem of Deidara's partner. Itachi could handle it; he could handle anything, really. She, on the other hand, couldn't, and instinctively decided to save herself instead. She didn't activate her Byakugan, but she could hear raised voices behind her—Sasori hadn't followed her.

"And *what* was the purpose of that, Sasori-san?" Itachi asked loudly.

"If she grew a spine it wouldn't be a problem..." Sasori's voice drifted off as she got out of hearing range, and only then did she dare activate her bloodline limit. The world around her inverted, and she targeted the two men behind her. Itachi's chakra was slowly trickling up towards his eyes, what she had learned was a warning sign with him. Sasori's chakra, as always, was that fist-sized ball near his heart. Neither of them looked particularly interested in chasing after her in the rain in a muddy, dense forest.

Once they were out of the range of even her sight, Hinata let herself sag against a tree. She knew that Sasori didn't particularly like her, but *why* in god's name was he chasing her instead of Deidara? It may have been a selfish wish, but it also followed the logic of shinobi. Go for the tougher target first. She was just a lowly little chuunin kunoichi, the only outstanding aspect of her being her bizarre eyes. Deidara was already worlds ahead of her in skill.

She shut off her Byakugan, coughing slightly. Already she was catching a cold... no doubt it'd annoy the heck out of Itachi for the next few weeks or so. She sneezed as well, wiping her nose on her already soaked and muddy sleeve. Her current ensemble was totaled, completely destroyed by the rain, mud and branches. That was the least of her worries, of course.

If Sasori was *still* chasing after her, apparently he meant business. He was a member of the Akatsuki, so no doubt he could catch up to her if he really wanted to. So what was with the game of cat and mouse?

Unless that's just it, she thought sourly. He's just playing a game with me. Deidara would confront him, but I would run... so he wants to chase me instead. And I bet it's driving Deidara-kun mad, wherever he is... oh, I hope they don't get into a fight again. She started fretting, wondering if there was a way she could contact the blonde without Sasori knowing. Really, it was just plain cruel, the way the Suna-nin acted towards her.

Hinata pushed herself off of the tree, steadying herself on her wobbly legs. Maybe she had run farther than she'd thought. Or maybe the effects of the growing cold were having a heyday with her immune system. She scanned the area for something she could climb or burn-and then her eyes alighted on the mud beneath her sandals.

Mud was like clay, right...?

Nearly a half hour later, Hinata had miserably discovered that mud was *not* like clay, not at all. She was now alternating between sniffing, coughing and sneezing regularly, and if she thought she was soaked before, it was nothing compared to now. The rain was getting colder, too. But Sasori hadn't found her, so she decided that he had probably been chased off by Itachi (who had then probably been too lazy or busy to go looking for her to inform her of this). Wiping the remains of a mud bird off of her hands, she stood up, letting the raindrops rinse the rest of it off for her.

The heiress stood up, and, moving wet hair out of her eyes, she turned back to the rough direction of where Amegakure should be.

Only instead of the distant skyline of the city, she was met with stunned white eyes.

-.-.-

Deidara was getting bored of hiding. Sasori hadn't shown up for about an hour, though when he asked other members he didn't exactly get the answers he was looking for. Worse, he had no idea where his Hyuuga partner was. Hidan had even lost track of her, which was odd, considering how he'd acted after she supposedly converted to Jashinism in a vain attempt to keep Sasori away.

So both his partners were missing.

It left a rather melancholy Deidara in their wake.

He wandered around the headquarters that was now theirs, looking for any sign of white eyes or red hair. Instead he found blue hair and black eyes. Now, Deidara didn't particularly like Itachi, especially after he'd been so cruel to the Hyuuga, but he was also her teacher. He was most likely the best bet. (And if that failed, he could probably annoy Kisame into helping him search.) "Hey, uh, Itachi, yeah."

The Uchiha glanced up, stopping in mid-sentence with his conversation with his partner. "...Yes?"

"Have you seen Bya-chan?" Deidara's eyes were on Kisame, rather, because he had no idea what mood Itachi was in. He hadn't placed very well in either race, and he hadn't exactly been thrilled when dragged into the races to begin with.

"I haven't." The Kiri-nin replied with a shrug. "You, Itachi-san?"

"Is she still missing?" Itachi asked calmly, raising his eyebrow a fraction of a millimeter. He coolly ignored his partner's question.

"Yeah, obviously, if I'm asking about her." The blonde replied exasperatedly. "And if you see Sasori-danna, too, tell him he's a bastard, yeah."

"Will do." Kisame grinned at him, giving him a brief thumbs-up.

"I'll go find her." The Uchiha turned, rather suddenly, and stalked off as if Deidara hadn't said a word. Mouth agape (all three, actually), he was speechless at Itachi's... Itachi-ness. He had known where she was, and had the audacity to go fetch her?

"W-Wait, wait up—" He called, but a rather forceful hand on his shoulder held him in place. He looked up angrily at Kisame (the shark-nin, of course, just grinned back down at him).

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Itachi-san really isn't in a good mood; he and Sasori got in quite the fight earlier. Sasori's probably still hunting that poor chick down, and if he finds Itachi again it won't be pretty. Trust me, no matter how much you want to be that kunoichi's knight in shining armor, step down this time." He advised sagely, nodding to himself. Deidara frowned at him; he was making too much sense for his liking.

But then again, it might just be worth it to see Sasori and Itachi fight. They were both so stuck-up and arrogant, it would be entertaining to see who lost. (Of course, the winner probably wouldn't be too generous to anyone else—namely a specific art-loving Iwa-nin—afterwards if they caught anyone watching.) "Yeah, yeah... whatever. I'm gonna go find... Danna, or someone, yeah..." He yanked his shoulder away from the taller shinobi, letting his voice trail off as a wicked grin spread across his face. Itachi plus Sasori plus himself must equal... fun.

He disappeared down the hallway before Kisame could fit another word in edgewise. After a few moments' reaction time, he merely shrugged, mumbling something about not caring whether they massacred half the village and organization.

Deidara's plan, however, crashed and burned when he found Sasori near the Amegakure gates. The redhead was soaked, but didn't seem to mind the rain; instead, he was just staring out at the forest, leaning casually against the village's wall, arms crossed. He didn't glance up as the blonde approached, but instead, he remarked, "We have a mission."

"What?!" That caught him off guard, to say the least. Thoughts of the two Konoha ninja temporarily forgotten, Deidara's jaw dropped and he wondered *how* the leader could have gotten it into his pierced head that they needed another mission. Especially when he was running out of training time... he had less than a month left.

"We have. A mission." Sasori repeated, turning his eyes on him at last.

"To do *what*, yeah? We're running out of time before—"

"To capture the Ichibi." He cut him off with that one statement, effectively rendering Deidara speechless. "Leader-sama says your training has paid off—thanks to your *performance* in the race this afternoon—and has bumped the date up to today. He wants another tailed demon as soon as possible."

"Then... then why can't one of the other teams go out?" Deidara could feel himself going pale. True, he'd gotten faster, and true, he'd nearly perfected his C3... but was he really ready to face that

monster again? Last time was disastrous, and this time they'd have tightened security as well. And it wouldn't be like the Kazekage had been sitting around, peacefully waiting for them, all this time.

"He wants to. But he wants the Ichibi first. Hidan and Kakuzu are to be sent out next for theirs—the Nibi—but they haven't quite tracked her down yet. He wants results *now*, and we're the only ones able to go." Sasori said scornfully, though Deidara didn't think that the anger was directed at him; more like at Pein. He got the feeling that there was more to it, but he didn't dare press the Suna-nin.

"But I need to find Bya-chan first—"

"No, you don't. She would only get in the way this time. This is going to be a quick mission—go in, take the Ichibi, get out. We don't need theatrics this time, Deidara." Sasori's voice was dropping lower and lower, almost at a growl now. Something was wrong here. Deidara couldn't even begin to fathom the rationale behind it, but something was definitely wrong.

Still, just because Sasori was in a pissy mood didn't mean he would willingly leave the Hyuuga kunoichi back here, alone. "I'm not leaving without Bya-chan, yeah. Leader-sama can go screw himself for all I care."

Up until that point, Sasori had been scowling at him. But with that last sentence, his mouth turned upwards... into a small smile. A *sad* smile. "You have no respect for Leader-sama, do you...?" Then, after a long pause (because Deidara didn't *dare* reply to him), the redheaded artist added, in the closest thing to a small voice that the Iwa-nin had ever heard him use, "You're not going to want to stay."

"Just let me find Bya-chan, yeah."

"You'll both die." There was such raw emotion in his voice (for a shinobi) that it yet again made Deidara pause. What was he talking about? He obviously had a few death-related problems to work out, but why would they die? Gaara might be a monster, but surely it wouldn't be that hard to capture him alive. If all else failed, Deidara could blow up Sunagakure or threaten it to get him to come along.

"Sasori-danna, I'm not going to die, and I am going to go find Bya-chan, yeah..." The explosives expert backed away carefully, keeping his eyes on Sasori. If he didn't understand the situation, it probably wasn't a good idea to stick around. Plus, if they really were leaving, he'd *have* to find her. There was no way he'd leave her behind. "Give me an hour. I'll find her."

Sasori just watched him leave silently, an unreadable expression on his young face.

--.-

Neji and Hinata stared at each other for several long minutes. Excruciatingly long minutes. Neji felt he ought to say something, but his mouth couldn't move. He felt he ought to do something, but his legs wouldn't work. He felt shell-shocked.

Then, finally, Hinata was the one to break the silence. Her words weren't exactly kind. "What are you doing here?" She asked quietly, her colorless eyes still locked onto his and her body posture somewhat rigid. She wasn't happy to see him. Surprised, yes, but all signs pointed to *anger*.

Neji was confused. He'd been looking for her... and here she was, just a few kilometers from Amegakure. No one else in sight. Completely alone... it would be so easy to finally just take her away from this, from the Akatsuki. "I'm here for you, Hinata-sama."

"Don't call me that, Neji-niisan." He grimaced mentally.

"I'll stop calling you that when you stop calling me 'niisan'..." He replied quietly, dropping his eyes to her sandals. The last thing he wanted to be right now was a brother...

"How... how did you find me?" Now her voice sounded frightened, not angry. That would explain her stance; she wasn't angry at him, just scared of the sudden situation. That was much more like the Hinata he knew.

"...Sasuke told me. He's coming for Itachi."

"He can't. Itachi will kill him." He glanced up, back at her face. Her expression told him that there was something else concerning Itachi, but she didn't dare say it. She was still just as readable as before... Neji hadn't been aware that he had been this worried about how much several months with the companionship of the Akatsuki would have changed her.

"That isn't our business. Uchiha isn't alone, however. This will not be a pretty conflict, and I don't want you anywhere near it, Hinata-sama."

"*Don't* call me that... please..." Her voice shifted into desperation. Hinata was very clearly scared of the situation, and it made Neji feel horrible. *Why* was she scared of *him*?

"As you wish." He agreed monotonously. He seriously doubted he could break the habit at this point, but may as well agree with her. Frightened deer bolted at a moment's notice; he didn't want her doing the same. Seeing him probably upset her, at least seeing him so close to Amegakure. This would understandably disturb the balance she'd worked to gain during her time with the organization. She was unsure of his appearance, and her loyalties. It was written clear as day across her face.

"Sasuke will never make it past the gates..." She mumbled, looking down at her feet. She probably just caught on that she was giving so much away with her expressions. "He shouldn't be coming. ...Neither should you."

"I missed you. My duty is to protect you, Hinata-sa—Hinata. The constant company of a large group of S-ranked criminals is hardly safe for you." He said stiffly. She didn't say anything for a long time, but then, she sniffed. When she looked back up at him, her white eyes were tinged pink and there were tears filling them.

"They'll kill you if they find you." She whispered in a fearful voice. Then, all of a sudden, she ran forward and wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. Neji was taken aback, and had no idea how to react to the sudden hug. "I-I thought y-you we-were dead be-before...! I don't want you to-to die a-again! Pl-Please don't do-do that t-to m-me!" Hinata sobbed, tightening her hold on him.

It clicked in his mind; she was scared *for* him, not *of* him. He slowly placed his own arms around her, rubbing her back comfortingly. "I won't do that to you, Hinata. ...We could be as far as the border to the Rain before anyone noticed you were missing. Then they would have to contend with Uchiha and his team, so we could escape, together."

"N-No!" She looked up at him, distraught. "Sa-Sasori is looking fo-for me, right now...! He-He

would kill us both if we d-did anything!"

"Who is Saso—" Neji felt the chakra too late. He instinctively dodged backwards, Hinata still in his arms, as the pair of kunai thudded into a tree where they had been standing just seconds before. His head snapped to the side where the weapons had come from, and he registered the black cloak emblazoned with red clouds before anything else.

Neji was expecting Deidara, but not who was standing there.

"Another Konoha shinobi. Are you trying to betray the Akatsuki, Hinata?" Uchiha Itachi asked flatly. His eyes were red, the pupils rotating slowly.

"N-No, Itachi-senpai!" Hinata replied at once, backing out of Neji's protective embrace. She shifted slightly, so that she was standing in between them. The movement wasn't lost on either of the shinobi. "He-He's—"

"I am Hyuuga Neji, Hinata-sama's cousin and protector. I can assure you, I am no longer affiliated with Konohagakure." Neji replied quietly, not daring to activate his Byakugan, for fear of a genjutsu or sneak attack. Itachi was also a Konoha-nin, so he knew exactly what the Byakugan did, and what techniques came with it. He probably even knew about the blind spot, too.

"Then why is your hitai-ate untouched?" Itachi asked, his face completely blank. The man was unreadable. No inflection in his voice, not the smallest expression or movement of his body.

Neji had no words to answer him. The best thing he could do was to very slowly reach up and take off his headband, revealing his Cursed Mark. Then he slipped a kunai out of his pouch, dragging the metal tip against the plate on the hitai-ate, cutting the leaf on it cleanly in half. The Hyuuga then replaced the weapon, and tied it back onto his forehead, almost defiantly. He caught a glance of Hinata's expression; it was shocked, with nearly a touch of sorrow.

Needless to say, this was *not* how he expected their reunion to go.

Itachi didn't say anything, and it looked like he was losing his patience. Evidently just scratching it wasn't going to do the trick. And while this was a low move, it was a shinobi-eat-shinobi world out there. Sasuke could deal with it. "Your little brother, Sasuke, is coming. He was the one who notified me of your whereabouts. He is coming to kill you, with a team of three other ninja."

"I've known he was coming for me. He won't succeed." Finally, the smallest hint of emotion entered his voice: arrogance. The Uchiha still remained unmoving, though. "Why are you here, Hyuuga-san?" The courtesy title was a bit unnerving.

"I am here to take Hinata-sama back with me."

"If you are a missing-nin, where do you plan on taking her back to?" He asked politely.

"Back to Konohagakure, if need be. We can make our own life elsewhere." Neji knew Itachi was backing him into a corner. He was fighting it, but he wasn't going to win this one without intervention. What the stoic Uchiha would do, then, was still a mystery.

"And what are your intentions towards my student?" The Uchiha inquired, the smallest, barest hint of a smirk present.

Neji remained impassive, though the student remark had surprised—and hurt—him. Hinata was training under this man? What reason had compelled her to do *that*? Worse, here was the proverbial corner he had just gotten himself into. "I... care about her." He replied carefully,

fielding the question. Itachi didn't seem pleased with the answer, but he couldn't do very much about it.

"Itachi-senpai... pl-please don't." Hinata said suddenly, her back to her cousin. She probably could read Itachi's expressions (or lack of) better than he, but he didn't like her butting in like that. Neji looked past her towards the Uchiha, glancing up into his eyes. Still red, still Sharingan. "Don't look at his eyes!" She said forcefully, catching his attention as she looked back over her shoulder. He blinked in surprise. Itachi just snorted, almost scornfully.

"Use proper judgment, for once, little kunoichi. Hyuuga-san stands no chance against me in any sort of fight, so don't bother choosing sides." He deadpanned. "If I were any other Akatsuki member, would you have the luxury of pleading for his life?"

Her head bowed slightly; Neji could picture her biting her lip, staring down at her feet in embarrassment. "No... please, Itachi-senpai. Neji-niisan wouldn't do anything, he *couldn't* do anything." (He frowned slightly, his pride a bit stung by the comment.) "He just... I..."

Itachi half-turned, staring off into the forest, towards Amegakure. After a long while, he stated, "If I ever see him again, I will kill him without further thought. Get him out of here before Sasori finds you both."

With that final threat, the Uchiha jumped into a tree and disappeared from view. Just in case, Neji activated his Byakugan. True to his word, Itachi was heading back to the city. (And this time, Neji was going to keep his bloodline limit on. Whoever this Sasori person was, he didn't seem like the type of person he'd like to run in to anytime soon.)

Hinata's shoulders sagged in relief, and she sighed heavily. "...I'm sorry, I had thought he would kill you." She apologized for no significant reason, turning to face him with a falsely cheery smile.

"Since when are you Uchiha Itachi's student?" Neji asked harshly, crossing his arms. Her happy façade dropped instantly as she flushed.

"H-He's just teaching m-me some genjutsu s-so I don't..." She left off, hastily looking away, feigning interest in the forest around them. Her protector was quite curious as to what she would have finished that sentence with, but she was flustered enough without him having to pressure her for such things. Another time perhaps.

"Your father would have a heart attack to hear that you are learning anything from an Uchiha." He couldn't resist saying, the mental image of it a bit too good to pass up. She smiled slightly, the thought obviously having occurred to her before.

"Did you... d-did you really come all this way just because he assigned you to protect me...?" She asked quietly, furrowing her brow. She shyly tucked a lock of her dark hair behind her ear, still chewing on her bottom lip.

"My duty to protect you is second nature to me by now." He replied carelessly. Her reaction to it, however, nearly broke his heart. She sighed, frowned, and almost looked ready to cry. Quickly, he amended, "I care about you enough that I would follow you anywhere, Hinata-sama."

"Please don't call me that anymore, Neji-niisan. Father has probably already replaced me as heir, and as a runaway I'm lower in rank than you now."

"You didn't run away. You were kidnapped."

"But I haven't returned... I *like* it with Deidara-kun. He's funny and he cares about me. Itachi-

senpai is... well, he isn't very kind, but he teaches me things and he keeps Hidan away. Konan-senpai is very kind to me as well. These people... I care about them as well. They are far nicer to me than the Hyuuga compound was. Oh, aside from you, of course!" She added hastily, red-faced.

"So you would rather stay with the Akatsuki than come with me?" He asked sadly, afraid of her answer. It was an impossible question to ask of her, but it had to be asked nonetheless. "Because... you heard Itachi. He will kill me if he ever sees me again. I can't stay here with you, or anywhere near here."

Me or the Akatsuki... your choice, Hinata-sama, he thought sullenly. The odds were against him. If she had really gotten this attached to a group of S-ranked killers... he was only her cousin. A protector assigned at birth.

Even if he cared about her.

Even if he would lay down his life for her.

Even if he would follow her to the ends of the world.

Even if he loved her.

"Please don't make me answer this." She said quietly. Neji just closed his eyes, Byakugan still active, though. He had lost his chance, the proverbial battle for her. If she couldn't outright decide, it was a lost cause. He couldn't become her white knight in shining armor; he was doomed to stay in that knight's shadow, dark and insignificant in her eyes.

Naruto may have started out as that white knight, but it seemed as if Deidara had replaced him. Neji stood no chance. Wordlessly, he turned on his heel, walking away from her.

She didn't say anything to stop him.

Instead, Hinata ran forward, hugging him again, this time from behind. Her arms were tight around his chest, and she didn't seem to want to let him go. He didn't say anything or respond in any way, just keeping his eyes about a foot in front of his feet, lidded and glazed.

"I'm so sorry, Neji...!" She cried into his back, shaking slightly. "I-I'm just so confused... and I don't know! I care about Deidara-kun, but I-I lo—"

This time, with his Byakugan, Neji saw him coming. Hinata must have noticed him as he stiffened, instinctively turning to look back, though he would have given his left arm to know what she would have finished that sentence with. Whoever it was was coming towards them at a high speed, chakra full and giving no clues as to who it was.

"Someone's coming." He said shortly.

"Wh-Who?" She asked, almost fearfully. No doubt she didn't want a repeat of just a few minutes ago.

"I don't know."

"What's the chakra look like? L-Like, is it a small ball...?"

Neji raised his eyebrow, wondering *what* she was talking about. No living creatures, let alone a ninja, could have chakra like a 'small ball'. "No, it is human-shaped and very decidedly a shinobi. Wait... the arms... there are some sort of anomalies on his hands, in his arms."

"Oh, so it's not Sasori," She sighed in immense relief. After a beat, though, she jerked her head back up, shouting, "It's Deidara!"

"Huh? ...Oh damn, that's not good!" Neji ducked out of her grasp, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Deidara will not let you go, Hinata. You need to make this decision for yourself, right now. Me, or him?"

"I—Give me time?" She pleaded, looking somewhat frayed by the pressure. "I-I'll find you, and I can tell you then. Just—just stay away from Amegakure." There were so many holes in her plan it wasn't even funny. But the raw desperation he saw in her likewise wasn't funny.

Unfortunately, Deidara had apparently gotten faster. A lot faster. He was closing in quickly now, and they had a sparse few seconds before he would be within normal sight. Neji couldn't afford to be seen by another Akatsuki member, especially one he had a long-standing grudge with.

"Hinata, that won't work—"

"I'll find you, I promise!" She said in a high voice.

Then Neji was forced to flee, lest he fight a fully-fledged Akatsuki member. Just as he was darting into the undergrowth, he heard the overly-familiar voice call out, "Hey, Bya-chan..." Neji just closed his eyes, gritting his teeth.

The first time he had seen her in months... and it ended in disaster. The genius in him told him to face facts. She was lost to him now. It was just... perhaps the fool in him wouldn't let him give her up.

An hour later he was standing on the other side of the Rain border, staring at the sheet of rain approximately ten feet in front of him. It was only slightly amazing that it was raining only *in* the Land of Rain, but he had a sinking suspicion that the rain, if that particular about where it fell, wasn't that innocent. The Caged Bird had less than seven days left to convince Hinata to come with him—to wherever—before Sasuke and his crackpot team would move in and the bloodbath would begin.

He felt a shadow on him, and looked up.

A clay bird soared overhead, flapping its wings. Hinata, sitting on the tail feathers, glanced down as they passed, though whether or not she could have seen him was up for debate. Neji only groaned. *Where is she going now...?* The bird went on out of sight, heading southwest. The only country down there was the Land of Wind. *Why are they heading there?*

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The real mission to Sunagakure to capture Gaara is at hand! Will Deidara fare better this time around? And what about Hinata's sudden predicament with Neji?

A High Price

Chapter Notes

WARNING: There will be CHARACTER DEATH in coming chapters. Much death. Can't stand the thought of losing your favorite character? Stop reading now or forever hold your tears. (Also: Going to gloss over parts of the fight. It follows the canon manga plotline fairly well, and I'll mention what is changed.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Deidara thought he was going insane. He really did.

Either that, or everyone else had. Maybe he was the only sane one. He'd known since his Academy days that the higher rank a shinobi got, the more eccentricities they were likely to develop, but this was pushing it.

Sasori had suddenly gone from silent asshole to overprotective mother. He wouldn't stop chattering, rather nervously, telling Deidara what to do and what not to do, not to get hurt, come back alive, not to overdo it, not to get cocky, and to come back alive. He seemed to place particular emphasis on coming back alive. When asked about it, however, he just snappishly replied, "Because without ten members the sealing of the Bijuu will take too long, brat. Now shut up and fly the damn bird."

The Hyuuga had taken a u-turn with her personality ticks, reverting back to stuttering, pushing her fingers together (though he'd thought that Itachi had broken her of the habit), and jumping at every little thing. She hadn't looked him in the eye since earlier, and she wouldn't even look anywhere in the vicinity of the Suna-nin. She was almost clinging to the tail feathers, unwilling to socialize in the least.

Unfortunately, Sasori had insisted on bringing Kabuto again, as well. This time, the reasoning was just as vague as last. But Kabuto at least was the same; fake, polite, and smirking. He'd always been insane anyway, Deidara had thought.

They were in Sunagakure by nightfall.

Hinata had thought that traveling with just Sasori and Deidara was bad, but Kabuto was the worst. He had the perception to pick up on something, and the audacity to ask her about it. Not to mention the sadism to *keep* mentioning it. She'd finally just taken to ignoring him completely as they landed, just outside the city.

Traveling by bird was a lot faster, though she wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Suddenly, the actual weight of this was thrust upon her. Capture Gaara, a Jinchuuriki, alive... or die. And short of casting some sort of genjutsu on him, there wasn't much she could do.

Hinata felt frayed.

"You may want to put this on." Kabuto said cheerfully, pulling some sort of cloth out of his backpack. Donning it, she realized it was a black traveling cloak, and he held out another towards her while rummaging through his bag with his other hand. Hinata hesitantly took it, wondering why she couldn't just wear her regular ensemble. But when the medic-nin took out a white and red ANBU mask, Hinata had to put her foot down.

"N-No. I'm n-not going to-to pretend to b-be an ANBU..." she hissed at him, narrowing her eyes defiantly. He didn't look at all surprised by her insolence, but instead just slipped the feline mask over his face.

"If they see that you're Hyuuga Hinata, you will be targeted. Call it a bluff. Deidara won't be able to concentrate on capturing Gaara if he's worrying about you, can he?"

She stared at him for a long while, then muttered, "That was a low blow, Kabuto-kun," as she pulled on the cloak. He just patted her on the head, smiling, handing her a mask. She turned it over in her hands, staring at the eyeholes and the rabbit design. She hadn't ever been one to play dress-up as a younger kunoichi, and had never gotten the chance to play pretend ANBU. (It was a common game among Academy students.) This would be the first time she ever wore one of the infamous masks... and to do what? Break into Sunagakure as part of an Akatsuki team to kidnap the Kazekage?

This was more than playing pretend.

Hinata slipped it over her face, adjusting it so she could see out of it properly. She squinted into the sudden darkness, more than a bit amazed at how such elite shinobi could see out of such things. If she hadn't had the Byakugan, she'd practically be blind except to what was directly in front of her.

Kabuto entered her limited field of vision. "I must admit, seeing nothing but darkened white eyes is a little frightening. I'm sure you'll chase off any other ANBU with just a look." He said cheerfully, fake as ever.

"Can't you ever be nice...?" She sighed, turning away. At least it was more than easy to pointedly ignore someone with the mask.

When she looked around, however, there was no sign of either Deidara or Sasori. Hinata looked up, but there weren't any clay birds hovering overhead, either. "Where—"

"I expect Sasori-sama will be calling his contact to let them into the gates." the masked medic-nin said vaguely, gesturing towards the massive wall. Two black dots were barely distinguishable against the darkness of the gate.

A man wearing the traditional Suna attire was also waiting for them, arms folded behind his back rigidly. Sasori was also somehow back in his faithful Hiruko, its metallic tail swishing in annoyance. He was talking, and Hinata had almost forgotten about the dry rasp that being inside the puppet made his voice. "—and we will need to get inside the gates now. If anyone finds out about our presence, kill them."

"Yes, Sasori-sama."

Kabuto made an odd little noise in his throat, missed by everyone except the heiress. She turned to glance at him, but the mask made the movement moot. Deidara shifted—almost *nervously*—from foot to foot, his cloak rustling around his knees.

"What are *you* waiting for, brat? Get going." Sasori said flatly, jerking his head towards the city before them. The blonde gave a start, blanching, unsure of the gesture. "I'm not fighting with you. I have my own business to take care of. Get going, and *don't* keep me waiting." he hissed, narrowing his puppet's eyes.

Deidara didn't say anything for awhile, instead staring at the landscape of Sunagakure. Sasori growled at him impatiently, but the Iwa-nin only held up a hand to placate him. "Hmm... Bya-chan, you stay on the ground. I'll attack Gaara in the sky, yeah. You and Kabuto can be my backup, and sabotage any attempts—"

"No."

"—to attack... what, yeah?" He raised an eyebrow, turning towards his partner expectantly. "Do you have a problem with Bya-chan assisting me, Sasori-danna?"

"I have no problem with her. But Kabuto will be staying with me." Deidara didn't obviously like the idea of Hinata being on her own, especially in a small war. But she could see the sense in his strategy; he couldn't afford to be flying *and* carrying her, and she would be valuable to him as ground assistance. It was most likely the best plan available, especially if neither Sasori nor Kabuto were going to help them.

"Fine, fine." Deidara grinned ruefully, and bowed towards her. "Shall we, Hyuuga-sama?"

"Yes, we shall, Deidara-dono." She smiled a smile she was not feeling, returning the bow. Sasori tried to decapitate Deidara with Hiruko's tail, but the blonde just laughed at him, avoiding the attack by enlarging one of his birds and leaping onto it. Hinata, masked with her hare ANBU disguise, jumped down off of the small cliff onto the nearest rooftop. She followed the disappearing clay bird from the sand, hands keeping her hood in place, only glancing back once to see Sasori telling Kabuto something.

--.-

Twenty minutes in, Deidara had effectively taken out all of the guards that had been posted to watch the skies. But not five minutes after that, the Kazekage had spotted him.

Gaara was floating quite contentedly above the Kage tower, arms crossed, glare completely dispassionate. He stared for a long while at Deidara's cloak, as if memorizing the design. "... You, again. You're Akatsuki." he stated.

"Yeah, I am. And I don't care who you tell that information."

Gaara stayed completely unmoving as the clay-using artist and his sand darted in and out of buildings, weaving through his city before. Almost right off the bat, Deidara noticed that some of the sand seemed to be a bit faster than the large mass that was doggedly following him. Images flashed before his eyes from their last fight, but he didn't want to get hasty and hypothesize about something that wasn't there. Sasori may have told him to hurry, but it didn't mean he had to get sloppy.

Deidara swooped down into a steep dive, his birds wingtips brushing the sand below before he rose again, going nearly vertical. The sand arced up and relentlessly shadowed him, but the faster he went, the more a certain blob of sand seemed to pull ahead of the rest of the attack. He pulled

his body closer to that of his bird, spinning in midair to avoid a sudden stab of sand, hanging upside-down for a brief moment, feeling weightless.

But then gravity kicked back in and he raced back towards Gaara, wondering just how the sand would react to attacking its own controller. Deidara snickered behind his collar, dipping his hands into his clay pouches. They were still full; plenty for taking down this Jinchuuriki.

As he neared the Kazekage, he swerved suddenly to the left, narrowly missing him. The bird's wingtip brushed his shoulder. The sand following him, however, looked as if it hit a solid wall in front of Gaara, spraying off of an invisible sphere just in front of him, drizzling downwards from the temporary loss of control.

Interesting, Deidara noted, smirking. He narrowed his black-rimmed eyes, focusing on Gaara's face with his scope as he turned around; the redhead looked as angry as he'd ever seen him. *If I want to take him out, I'll need to get a bomb inside that shield of his... I think I could use that sand to my advantage.*

As the night wore on, Deidara was throwing every bomb he could think of at the younger ninja, but to no avail. His sand shield was always a step ahead of him. It was impenetrable from the outside. Even his hummingbirds just weren't quite fast enough... when he was expecting them. If there was a suitable distraction...

But as he was thinking this, Deidara himself got distracted.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a spike of sand—the faster sand—detach itself from the mass that had been leisurely following him. Vainly and instinctively he did a desperate (and rather violent) barrel roll to the side, nearly throwing him off in the process. In fact, he made the only mistake he would make of the night; he lost his footing in the sudden movement, and slid to one side, sliding cleanly off of the bird's clay torso.

He reached out one hand to catch the base of the wing, trying to haul himself back up. Below him, the huge sand collection roared up to meet the dangling shinobi. Deidara grinned nervously, but his bird was reflecting his growing panic and wouldn't stay still. He felt the sand encase his foot, and used the sudden footing to kick off of to get back on the bird's back. He lost his sandal and half of his pant leg in the process, but as far as he was concerned, he didn't particularly need them compared to his foot.

Unfortunately, in his relief, he had forgotten about the faster breed of sand.

It came out of nowhere, racing towards him head-on. The Iwa-nin swore and darted aerially to the left, but the sand's speed was too much this time. It caught the fingers of his left arm, hastily encasing it up to the elbow. But then momentum caught up and it continued on its way—playing a brief but painful tug-of-war with Deidara's shoulder.

In the end, the sand won.

With a surprised gasp, he felt his arm ripped out of its socket, and turned back just in time to see the sand toss it away into the night before circling back in for the kill. ...Oh well. It hadn't been the arm with his ring on it, at least. Deidara tried not to think about it; *Kakuzu can sew it back on, Kakuzu can sew it back on...* It really didn't hurt as much as he thought it would, but that was probably just his body going into shock. Or maybe he was high on the adrenaline and endorphins that being in battle brought. Whatever worked.

"Time to pull out the big guns, yeah!" Deidara cackled, digging his remaining hand into his clay

pouch. He was running out, but he wouldn't need that much for a C3 bomb. It could pack a punch big enough to take out the whole city... and that's just what he planned on using it for. But not until he figured out how to get past that damn sand shield. Blowing up the city at that point would only piss Gaara off—not something he particularly felt like doing, especially now down to half the speed at which he could make his bombs.

Deidara resisted the impulse to look down at where his arm *had* been. Maybe he should blow up Sunagakure just to piss the little guy off. Payback is always a bitch, anyway; may as well make it worthwhile.

-.-.-

Hinata hadn't been worried until she saw Deidara lose his arm.

There hadn't been any activity that *wasn't* directed upon the two in the sky, so she had been left alone. ANBU only gave her a cursory glance. Most common ninja didn't even notice her. She was hanging around in the shadows, waiting and listening for some chance to sabotage the ground plans (or maybe even attempt to see what Sasori was up to). Quite the crowd was gathering, especially considering the fight had been going on for about a half hour—a monumental time for a one-on-one shinobi battle.

It had been pretty much a stalemate, until Deidara had slipped up and consequently lost his arm. Now he was at a definite disadvantage, though none of his body movements portrayed panic—or even any disturbance. Hinata was unsure of what that meant, or what his mindset right then probably was, but she just decided to do her best with the moment.

So she was currently darting from rooftop to rooftop, trying to find the severed arm where it had fallen.

It wasn't a particularly glamorous job, nor one she really wanted. But if she could find it, Kabuto might be able to do something. Or, if all else failed, Kakuzu could probably sew it back on with those threads of his. So there was hope, but looking for lost limbs wasn't a job she had envisioned for herself, even on this mission. She had almost had the notion that they would all escape from attacking Sunagakure and kidnapping the Kazekage with nothing but scratches and bruises.

Several ANBU passed her, not giving her a second glance. Either she fit in well enough with a casual glance, or they were more worried about the Akatsuki fighting their Kazekage. Just in case, though, she kept to the shadows of the nearest building, shrinking away inside her dark cloak. Even after they had passed, she waited a few moments before continuing on. No need to take unnecessary risks. One of the shinobi rules.

Hinata found the limb lying on a roof, the tongue lolling out in a very overly dead-ish way. She stared at it, unsure of whether or not she *really* wanted to pick the thing up. It was bloody and messy and disgusting, simply put. She looked up towards the moon, where Gaara and Deidara's silhouettes were. The Iwa-nin was dodging sand attacks quick easily, though Gaara didn't appear to be moving in the least with the barrage of bombs.

It virtually looked like a one-sided fight.

Gingerly, she picked up the arm, wrapping it in her sleeves to mop up a bit of the blood. She would

hang on to this, because when Deidara finished up his fight and they returned to Ame, Kakuzu could sew it back on and then everything would be perfect again. Because even if they did get injured horrifically, there was no way that they *couldn't* go back to the way things were before. They just couldn't. Hinata refused to accept it even as a possibility. Deidara losing his arm was just a temporary thing. This was just another mission, and nothing could go wrong that couldn't be fixed later on.

White eyes drew themselves back towards the two silhouettes in front of the moon. Nothing *could* go wrong. She wouldn't know what to do if it did. Unconsciously, Hinata clutched the arm to her chest a bit tighter.

-.-.-

Deidara was starting to modify his strategy. So far, there hadn't been any ground attacks that he couldn't handle—a few pitiful arrows was all. So his Hyuuga partner wasn't needed just yet, and it meant that he and Gaara were still one-on-one. He was starting to get a feel for the Kazekage's movements and attack patterns (though it had only cost him his arm), too. He could keep dodging for awhile longer, and he had enough clay left for... about a half dozen bombs, tops.

Time to wrap things up then.

Grinning savagely, Deidara flapped a bit closer. He just needed to get past his primary sand shield, and it would all be good. A distraction was in order, then. He pulled out his masterpiece, the only C3 bomb he had with him. Even so, it was larger than his normal creations; it had enough explosive clay in it to level half the desert. And Deidara only needed to destroy Sunagakure.

"You know what *this* is, yeah?" he called over to Gaara.

Gaara didn't reply, but his black-ringed eyes narrowed a little bit.

"This is my C3. This little doll has enough power to level your precious little Suna, yeah." He was suppressing the urge to start laughing, especially after Gaara's reaction—eyes widening again, mouth falling open slightly. (In the Jinchuuriki's terms, that was the equivalent of shrieking and fainting.) Instead, Deidara continued, "This'll teach you to appreciate art a bit more, hm? Because..."

He dropped the hollow-eyed sculpture, his remaining arm coming up to form the hand sign. It enlarged in a puff of smoke, still plummeting towards the unsuspecting Sunagakure below. Deidara noticed Gaara's eyes dash down towards it, and his arms reached out to call in the sand that would no doubt save his precious city. Quick as lightning, two double-winged hummingbirds pelted towards him, sneaking around the back towards the opening in his sphere-like armor.

"Because art is a *bang*!" he shouted gleefully. "*Katsu!*"

The bomb below exploded, a massive work of art. Even as high up as he was, Deidara felt the heat from the blast. Sand and smoke sprayed up all around it, quickly shielding the whole town from view. He didn't know whether or not Suna had survived, nor did he particularly care.

Just as the smoke was clearing, revealing an unharmed city underneath a vast buffer of sand, Gaara noticed the two birds suddenly there beside him. Too late, his sand raced up to close the circle—trapping one of the birds inside the sphere with him. Deidara laughed out loud at him; the very sand that had protected him all this time had just served to damn him.

The sand ball inflated a bit when the muffled bomb detonated. There was a long period of silence, and for a horrible moment, Deidara thought that his plan *hadn't worked*.

That had been his only ace in his sleeve, and one of his very last bombs. He would have to retreat or pass the Kazekage onto Sasori if it hadn't worked. Simply put, if that bomb hadn't taken Gaara out, Deidara was royally screwed.

But then, slowly, the sand around him began to crumble, leaving a limp form. Sand fell from his hair and clothes, drizzling down into the predawn sky, and Deidara felt a surge of triumph.

Then Gaara looked up at him, death written in his pale eyes.

The Iwa-nin blanched, completely passing shocked and moving onto full on *traumatized* that he had not only survived, but was conscious. He scowled, reaching into his dwindling clay supply for another bomb. *Resilient little pest...* he thought scornfully.

Instead of attacking, however, Gaara was staring down at his city. The mass of sand from the previous bomb was still there, hovering. Deidara snickered when he realized that the redheaded Jinchuuriki was trying to do; save Suna instead of himself. Gaara reached out a hand, wincing as he did so. Very slowly, the giant sand shield started shifting away from the homes and civilians, who were watching with awe.

Deidara wondered how long it would be before he passed out and let the sand fall. Studying him more closely, he noticed that Gaara was barely staying upright. Moving that amount of sand would undoubtedly be the straw that broke his back, but as for *when* that might be, he didn't care to find out. He just let the Kazekage move the sand, patiently waiting for his opportunity. He wouldn't let himself relax until that redheaded demon was unconscious—preferably dead, of course, but he was ordered to bring him back *alive*—and bound.

Gaara's gaze was still on the sand below. His eyes were beginning to glaze over, however, and he turned his head to the side slightly to spit out a bit of blood. Deidara had to give him credit for determination.

Once his city was out of immediate threat once more, the Kazekage was still conscious. His eyes, though dull and lidded, turned up to glare at his Akatsuki assailant. Deidara was more than taken aback; yeah, as the leader of Sunagakure, Gaara had to be tough-but this just wasn't *human*.

"What are you doing, still conscious, yeah?!" he demanded sourly, wondering how he was going to finish the fight now.

Instead of reply, the Ichibi's jailor coughed once more, and then, as if in slow motion, pitched backward. In a dead faint. His sand caught him reflexively, but as the ninja's consciousness slid further and further away, he started to fall. An immensely relieved Iwa-nin soared over and caught Gaara in his last bird's tail feathers, the clay wrapping around him securely.

Deidara had won.

--.-

The door burst open, revealing a haggard and bloody Yuura. Ebizou looked up calmly, tugging on his fishing rod a little. "Ebizou-jiisama!" Yuura shouted, chest heaving. His eyes flickered toward

the still form of Chiyo; she wasn't moving...

"...Yes?" the old man replied slowly, smiling slightly.

"Chiyo-baasama... is she... alright?" he asked hesitantly, still looking at the elder's sister.

"..." After a beat, Chiyo bolted upright, laughing raucously. "Hahaha, I bet you both thought I was dead!" she cackled, leaning backwards onto her heels.

"...Chiyo-baasama... this is hardly the time...!" Yuura said flatly, resisting the urge to sweat drop. She was known for her jokes and almost narcoleptic behavior, but still, she was needed right now. "Kazekage-sama has been kidnapped!"

This sobered up both elders instantly. "By who?" Ebizou asked quietly, almost meekly.

Yuura's eyes went to his sandaled feet, and he stepped back out of the doorway. Hiruko stood behind him, tail gleaming in the room's light. The puppet's eyes narrowed, and from within, Sasori rasped, "That would be *my* doing, grandmother."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara's managed to capture Gaara, but now what? Sasori seems distracted and distant...The princess is terrified out of her wits, especially since they've gotten wind of a team from Konoha supposedly coming to the Kazekage's rescue. Kabuto likewise seems on the edge of a breakdown...but his reasons are much, much different.

To Be Paid In Blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Kakuzu, can you sew my arm back on, yeah? ...Please?"

"No."

Aghast, Deidara's jaw dropped. "*What?! Why the hell not?!*"

The so-called treasurer of the Akatsuki gave him a wry look. "My services do not come *cheaply*. You better figure out just how much you're willing to pay for your arm before you ask me that again."

They made it out of Sunagakure relatively unharmed. They only had a couple of followers, some puppet-wielding kid and a few jounin Deidara assumed they had been taken care of in the worst possible way; Sasori didn't particularly seem to be in a great mood. He thought it may have something to do with Deidara actually succeeding in his mission, but he should be happy. *I'm not his ward anymore. I can go off and die for all he cares, now*, he thought sullenly.

But death was not an imminent threat; he was safely back with the Akatsuki, Gaara and all of his teammates in tow. He was, however, immediately threatened by the permanent loss of his left arm unless he came up with some serious cash, fast.

"Kakuzu, come on—I'll give you this mission's pay. How's that? A Jinchuuriki mission pays a bunch, I bet, yeah?" he said desperately.

"Eh." Kakuzu replied indifferently, shrugging. "It's not a great sum of money, you know..."

"Hey, come *on!* Just sew my damn arm back on—look at her! Look at Bya-chan, yeah! Do you want her to sit there and hold my severed arm all night?! She'll be even more traumatized!" He pointed back towards the masked girl (though it was sitting casually atop her head), who, on cue, whimpered and tried to look as pathetic and traumatized as possible. It wasn't a hard feat. Kakuzu winced, as though the sight was physically painful for him to see.

"Put that pleading look away, goddamnit. It's degrading of kunoichi," he said flatly, crossing his arms. "I'll accept the price of... this mission's pay and whatever your next mission's pay is. That's as low as I'm going."

It was a ridiculous sum of money, but Deidara didn't particularly care. "Agreed!" he said instantly, nodding eagerly. Not having an arm was getting to be a bit weird, and *now* it was starting to hurt...

"What are you two doing?!" Pein, back to being a shadow, flickered to life beside them. Neither member jumped, though Deidara frowned a bit. Konan, Tobi and Zetsu soon appeared as well, making it all of the members being present. Not physically, but as long as a shadow could sew his arm back on, Deidara didn't matter.

"He's fixing my arm, yeah... stupid Jinchuuriki ripped it off." he replied tersely. He wasn't particularly in a mood to be bossed around and he definitely wanted to keep his arm, but he didn't want to piss the leader off. "It'll only take a—*shit what are you doing that hurt!*" Deidara tried to jerk away, but Kakuzu held his shoulder firmly in place. For some reason, he thought that sewing a severed limb back onto his body would be a relatively painless experience. It was almost sad how

wrong he was.

Sasori snickered, sitting on top of Hiruko's back. He covered his mouth with his hand innocently when Deidara turned on him, though.

"I wasn't talking to you, though I would appreciate it greatly if you would hurry the hell up so we can get the Bijuu sealed before the Kazekage wakes up." Pein rolled his eyes with a huff. He then turned to the two ANBU look-alikes, his frown obvious even in the shadows. "You two are *not* Akatsuki, no matter how much you'd love it. Get out of the cave and guard the entrance, make yourselves useful."

The pair hastily headed for the only exit.

Deidara felt a bit put out at the fact that she couldn't be in there with him (to hell with Kabuto, he didn't care). He expected to be welcomed back as some sort of a hero for capturing a Jinchuuriki... but instead, he was divided from his princess and was now trying to ignore the fact that muscles and nerves reattaching themselves were *not* happy muscles and nerves. It was an odd sensation, suddenly regaining his left arm, but he was thankful just to have it.

"Hey, Leader-sama... what exactly does this entail, now, yeah? I captured the Jinchuuriki. Now what do we do with it?" He prodded Gaara's head with his sandal, lip curling a bit. With his eyes closed and his hair falling over that strange tattoo of his, he looked too much like Sasori for his tastes. He glanced out of the corner of his eye towards said missing-nin, who was staring at him intently.

"Why, we seal the demon, of course." Konan replied cheerfully. Her tone went beyond cheerful; it was... ecstatic. Her shadowed form moved towards Pein, and it was obvious she was smiling that mysterious smile of hers.

"And what does *that* entail...?" he asked warily, wincing when Kakuzu finally snapped the last thread. The threads in his skin were a bit odd, but he would deal with them. He'd rather have threads than no arm.

"Just watch." The Leader of the Akatsuki then placed his hands together, making signs.

-.-.-

"H-How long are we... banished out here?" Hinata asked nervously, leaning against the rock face. Having the leader snap at them wasn't a comforting experience, but it was overshadowed by the immense relief that Deidara was going to get his arm back.

Kabuto shrugged stiffly, staring down at his hands. They were shaking. "A few days, I assume..." His voice, however, was perfectly calm.

She paled underneath her mask. "A f-few days...?"

"Two to three, most likely. Even if they are a group of highly skilled S-ranked shinobi... they are sealing one of the tailed demons. Its chakra far out powers their own, and they have to override that tremendous power in order to seal it. No matter how strong they may be... the Akatsuki are only human," he explained shortly. He didn't seem to be in a very Akatsuki-friendly mood right then. She looked at him curiously, but when the medic caught her eye he just dropped his hands and

cocked his head to the side, undoubtedly smiling under his mask.

"Is anything wrong, Kabuto-kun?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. His behavior was quite... erratic, even for him. Had something happened while he and Sasori were alone in Sunagakure?

"Mm, no. Absolutely nothing is out of balance of what it should be." She thought it was rather weird to word it that way, and she felt that he was eluding her question. "Hey, Hinata... do you have a soldier pill, perhaps...?"

It clicked in her mind. "You're just running out of chakra." she said aloud, slipping her mask back onto the top of her head. She was concerned about him, especially if he was desperate enough to ask for a chakra boost. Was he worried he may have to use medical ninjutsu in the near future? Was he worried they'd get attacked while standing on guard...?

Kabuto looked away, his cat mask covering his expression. "Hinata... it doesn't concern you. I'm sorry for bringing it up."

Now she was definitely confused. But if he was anxious about something, he could share it with her. She could maybe help him... "Kabuto-kun, what's wrong? You can tell me...?"

"I'm... I'm just being stupid. Nevermind." He chuckled good-naturedly, rubbing the back of his hood sheepishly. But she could see through the ruse.

"Something is wrong. Did something happen in Suna...?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary happened to *me* in Sunagakure. I'd be more worried about Sasori-sama, if you want to waste your concern on an undeserving subject." he tried to change the subject, but she wouldn't have it. Deidara could worry about Sasori; she'd just stick with who was here in front of her.

"What's wrong, Kabuto-kun? You can tell me. I promise I won't tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about," she said pleadingly, taking a step towards him. If something was worrying him enough that he'd let it slip out to her, of all people, in the first place, it would probably be something major.

"You shouldn't worry about me." Kabuto turned away from her, crossing his arms. She placed a hesitant hand on his shoulder, and felt him stiffen underneath her touch.

"Humor me."

In a small voice, he said, "I... I'm... No, nevermind. It's nothing. Please let it drop. I wouldn't want to trouble you with useless things."

The Akatsuki was a place of dark and dangerous secrets, that she had always known. But what Hinata didn't quite realize was that those secrets expanded beyond the physical members. *What secrets am I holding...?*

-.-.-

Tsunade was not pleased.

No, that was a lie.

She was *beyond* the 'not pleased' state. She was furious. She felt like starting a major world war with the next diplomat to piss her off. Hell, the next person to even look at her funny. The man before her was an unfortunate man indeed.

He stood rigidly, sweating buckets and looking more than a little skittish.

"Are you telling me... that there have been Akatsuki-related occurrences *overnight*? Occurrences involving a certain Kazekage and involving *fatalities*?" she growled, lips curling in a somewhat evil grin. Damn, she needed a strong drink.

"Y-Yes Hokage-sama." The man paled considerably, and was looking like he sorely regretted being on shift to receive the messenger hawk that was carrying this information. "Kazekage-sama ha-has been kidnapped by a member of the Akatsuki, and his brother, Kankurou, was found dead outside the gates. Three ANBU have gone missing after pursuing them, and all of the night guard that was supposed to be on duty was slaughtered."

Tsunade groaned, rubbing her temples. After a moment's reprieve, she looked up at the man. "... Tell no one this. This information is strictly confidential and will not leave this room. Understood?" He nodded fearfully. "Go send a hawk back telling Suna that we'll send in reinforcements."

"Y-Yes, Hokage-sama." He bowed hastily and practically hit the door at a dead run.

Tsunade glanced over at Shizune, who had stayed quiet during the briefing. "...Go find me Sakura and the strongest drink in the village. Tell her to gather up Team Kakashi and get her ass over here *yesterday*."

"Yes." Shizune said immediately. She left the Hokage to her thoughts.

I don't want to send Sakura over there... but I need to send a good medic as a show of good faith. Not to mention we'll need Kakashi if it's Itachi... or any Akatsuki member, really. But I'll need another team to back them up. Who is available... Tsunade paused for a moment, going over the mental list of teams. *Damn it, no one. Team Gai should be arriving back from their mission tomorrow, however... That should work. Sakura can handle things until they catch up.*

She linked her fingers together, setting her chin atop them. Drink or no drink, this would be a very messy situation to work with. The Akatsuki had to have known about their alliance with the Sand, but should she *really* send Naruto, of all people? He was a Jinchuuriki as well, damnably enough, not to mention how personally attached he was to Gaara. It could potentially lead to a veritable disaster, especially if the Kyuubi's powers came into play—which they very well may.

But before Tsunade could revise her decision, the three people she had sent for were standing before her. (Unfortunately, Shizune—and the drink she ordered—were still missing.) "Alright, you three," The blonde woman slowly stood up, pushing herself off of her desk. "You have a mission."

The reactions were mixed. Sakura only seemed surprised, but Naruto's face could only be described as joyous. Kakashi, however, was more perceptive. His eye narrowed a bit.

"You are to go to Sunagakure. We have a crisis on our hands and I need a damn good team to send over there. Unfortunately, I only have you three." Team Kakashi drooped a little under the insult. "There have already been fatalities. The Kazekage has been kidnapped... by Akatsuki."

Predictably, Naruto's smile fell. "G-Gaara...?"

"Yes, Gaara. He has been kidnapped by an unknown Akatsuki member, and we can only assume that he or she had a partner in Sunagakure as well. You'll receive more information when you arrive there. You are to rescue the Kazekage and help Suna with any tasks they'll give you concerning the mission. When another team gets back, I will send them after you as back-up."

-.-.-

Two days later, several things ended at once. Team Kakashi was in Sunagakure, safe and sound and awaiting further orders. Unbeknownst to them, the sealing was finally completed by the Akatsuki, who were less than a day away from their position.

But unknown to the organization, they had another Jinchuuriki on their tails. And a very angry one at that.

Aside from some initial *problems* concerning a few members of the Sand (Kakashi *knew* he looked like his father, damn it, but the old woman should have been able to think clearly enough to recognize that if he was the White Fang, he should have been at least twenty years older), the mission itself was going swimmingly. At face value, anyway.

Temari was a wreck. Kankurou had been killed by one of the Akatsuki members, and her younger brother was missing. She was edgy and prone to bursting out in tears at random times, and it finally ended when she accidentally hit Naruto upside the head with her fan and Sakura was forced to give her a mild sedative. Kakashi was always saddened to see a ninja like this, let alone a jounin. The Akatsuki had done more than kidnap a leader and stop anyone from following them.

"So you have no idea who it was?" Sakura asked gently, rubbing Temari's arms comfortingly.

The fan-wielder just hiccupped slightly. "N-No... I came back after it—it was over. You'd best talk to s-someone else, who was here—"

"I know who it was," Chiyo, the elder who had previously wanted to slit Kakashi's throat, spoke up. He edged away from her, a bit nervously. (If that woman wanted, he would be lying on the ground, bleeding.) "I was there, with my brother." She looked around the room pointedly.

Temari got the hint and dismissed the guards who were stationed by the door. She shut the door, leaning against the wall. "We're alone now. Th-This information is... confidential."

"Yes. It would bring more than shame onto our village if anyone knew that one of our own was behind this..." Chiyo admitted darkly. Temari's eyes widened and Sakura gasped softly.

"A-A Suna ninja kidnapped Gaara? Who would have that kind of power? Wouldn't everyone in the village know if someone had more power than the Kazekage...?" the pinkette asked anxiously, biting her lip. Not only was that information disturbing enough, but if it was true, it could cause a rather bloody civil war. Konoha's place in it wouldn't be pretty.

"A missing-nin from Sunagakure." Chiyo said flatly. "I can count the number on one hand who are currently still affiliated with the village and have the kind of strength who can overpower a Jinchuuriki."

Kakashi and Naruto flinched at the word, but Sakura looked lost.

"Please continue," Kakashi said quickly. Chiyo may not fall under the same laws as Konoha-nin, but he could explain the concept later. Preferably with the Hokage's permission beforehand.

"...It was Sasori. Sasori of the Red Sand."

It was Temari's turn to gasp. Unfortunately, the name must have meant something, because she quickly dissolved into tears again. Sakura hurried over to compose the jounin, leading her over to the bench to sit on.

"It was his partner, though, who kidnapped Gaara-sama. Some younger ninja who used some sort of explosives. He was riding on a clay bird when Sasori left." Chiyo continued ominously. "Sasori also had Yuura, a higher-up in the government, on his side, but he left afterward."

Naruto's eyes flashed red, and everyone present felt a spike of angry chakra. "*Him...*" he snarled, clenching his fists. Kakashi placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him from doing anything too rash. "Let's get going, then. We know who we're after!"

"Not quite yet. We'd need to find them, first, Naruto."

"I'm coming with you." Temari said firmly, standing up.

"No, you're not." Sakura said, just as firmly, trying to get the older girl to sit back down. "You're in no shape to fight anyone."

"Yes I am! I am going to fight Sasori and rip that man to pieces—"

"No, Temari. You're staying here." Chiyo said calmly, smiling a bit. "I'll go."

This stilled the angry Suna-nin. "But Ch-Chiyo-baasama..."

"I've been wanting to see my cute little grandson again. And I'd rather see him before you get your hands on him. Listen—Kakashi, didn't you say that reinforcements from Konoha are coming?"

"Yes ma'am." he said immediately.

"Temari, you can join that team. It will give you a bit of time to calm down, and we need someone to stay behind and brief them on the situation." the elder said logically. Temari looked unsure, but quickly bowed with a quite affirmation of the plan.

-.-.-

Hinata had been napping when a firm hand shook her. She jumped awake, hastily pulling her ANBU mask back on, asking, "Wh-Who's attacking?!"

"No one, hopefully." Kabuto said lightly, smirking. "The sealing is done, and I would just like to let you know that you're allowed back in to be with your precious Deidara."

She blushed underneath the mask, thanking the fact that he couldn't see. "U-Um, yes... thank you?" Behind her, the rock face slid open, revealing the cave within. Hinata noted the seal on the 'door', wondering if they were really enough to stop anyone from coming in. Then again, she shouldn't doubt the Akatsuki. That harmless-looking seal could easily be any sort of horrific trap.

The heiress pulled her mask back off of her face, squinting in the sudden darkness. Everyone else had left, aside from the two physical members still there. Sasori was still sitting on top of Hiruko, whereas Deidara was sitting on... Gaara. She blanched at the sight, skittering over, nervously saying, "Wh-Why are you sitting o-on him? W-Won't that h-hurt him and won't he-he just g-get you when he a-awakens-"

"He's dead, yeah." Deidara replied flatly. "The sealing process kills the host. But Sasori-danna says we should keep the body as bait. No doubt the rescue team want proof of their precious Kazekage's death, yeah."

"O-Oh." She looked down at her feet, feeling rather stupid for worrying over a corpse. She didn't feel much, considering the last time she'd seen Gaara was during her first chuunin exam. He wasn't her friend, but she couldn't help but think of what Naruto would say if he saw her like this. "Y-You're going to fight th-the rescue team...? Wouldn't it be, um, easier to just r-run for it...?"

"Probably." Deidara shrugged nonchalantly. He didn't seem terribly enthused about the idea, but he stayed put. "Danna says he wants to fight them."

"I want to fight a particular Suna-nin who will most certainly be coming," he said by way of explanation, turning away from them. "You three can run like cowards if you wish."

"Nah. I think I'll stay. I've got both arms again, so I think I'll want to see whoever this person is, yeah." He grinned roguishly. Sasori rolled his eyes, almost looking disappointed.

But then, suddenly, there was a low, almost whistle-like sound. Hinata looked up in surprise, as did Deidara and Kabuto. Sasori, on the other hand, didn't seem very startled. "That would be the perimeter alarm. Leader-sama always puts jutsus on the places we seal the Bijuu, just in case. Someone is coming."

The whistling died off, and Hinata activated her Byakugan. She swallowed nervously, scanning the outside area to her limits. Then, there—she saw four people outside the entrance, staring up at the sealed rock. One of them, the tallest, appeared to be talking on a radio. Hinata felt herself pale when she recognized them, however, though it left her speechless. She just watched mutely as Hatake Kakashi continued talking on his radio, occasionally looking up at the singular seal on the boulder before him. He turned to Sakura, saying something, and she nodded and pulled her gloves on tighter.

Unwillingly, her eyes traveled towards Naruto. The Kyuubi's container. Her crush and idol. Part of the Rookie Nine, and her white knight.

His eyes were red.

Hinata deactivated her bloodline limit, closing her eyes in regret. "It's Hatake Kakashi, Haruno Sakura and Uzumaki N-Naruto. And some older woman who I do not recognize... Kakashi is talking on a radio, so I assume they have back-up..."

"The back-up does not matter. They will be held up with the defensive jutsus." Sasori said calmly. Deidara broke into a grin again, crossing his arms.

"So, the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki has come. Interesting, yeah." he commented. Hinata nodded miserably. Naruto wasn't Naruto anymore—he was just the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki. That was all, right?

"They won't get through for awhile. Still, it may be wise for you two to put your masks back on," Sasori looked pointedly at Kabuto and Hinata. They hastily obeyed him.

Almost on cue, however, the boulder broke apart with a bang. Four ninja darted inside, standing on the water in defensive stances. Sasori was already back in Hiruko, its tail deceptively hidden inside its cloak. Hinata immediately hid behind him, if only because he was a larger target than a sitting Deidara was.

"The Copy-nin..." Sasori hissed, almost inaudibly. If she hadn't been pressed up against him, she never would have heard him.

Naruto made a strangled, almost growl-like sound. His eyes were most definitely red now, and the markings on his cheeks—Hinata now recognized them as whiskers—became more pronounced. His eyes went from Deidara, down to the still form of Gaara. "Hey! Gaara, what are you doing, *sleeping* at a time like this?!" It hurt her to hear him like this, so instead she just clung to Hiruko and tried to block it out.

"Sleeping? Not likely, yeah." Deidara chuckled a bit, then reached down to pat Gaara's cheek. "He's dead. Been dead for awhile now, yeah."

"You *BASTARD!*"

"Hold it, Naruto!" Hinata peeked up to see Kakashi restraining his blonde student, glancing at the other two members of the team. He then noticed the ANBU-clad form of Kabuto, and his eye narrowed slightly.

"Hey, Sasori-danna... I think you'll probably get mad at me for saying this, yeah..."

"Then *why* would you say it?" Sasori asked skeptically.

"I want to fight Naruto. Let's say we have a score to settle, yeah?" Deidara smiled, tilting his head back a bit arrogantly. Sasori, though, didn't take kindly to that. Hinata felt a *whoosh* beside her, and Hiruko's tail nearly decapitated the Iwa-nin. Instead, he was back on his bird, hovering out of range of his irate partner. Deidara glanced at her, only for a split-second, and she nodded. He dove down to pick up Gaara's body, and she hopped onto the bird's back, hopefully unseen by any of them. She couldn't stand the thought of fighting any Konoha ninja.

"Drop Gaara this minute!" Naruto shouted, narrowing his eyes. His hair almost appeared to bristle, as if it were fur. Deidara turned, from helping Hinata up, looking rather bored.

"I think not. If you want him, yeah, try to catch me." With a sudden jolt, the bird lurched forward and was out into open skies before anyone else could say a thing. Hinata clung to Deidara's leg, trying to stay out of sight. Activating her bloodline limit again, she spotted Naruto tearing after them, jumping from branch to branch on all fours. Kakashi was chasing after him, obviously trying to calm him down.

This red-eyed, whiskered, feral thing was *not* Naruto. It couldn't be. Still, she saw it, hunting and following them like prey. There was bloodlust in those eyes. They couldn't be his. Hinata buried her face against Deidara's leg, from where she was still sitting. She didn't want to see any more of this—this *beast*. That was the Kyuubi following them, not Naruto. It couldn't be Naruto. It just *couldn't*.

Sasori sighed, watching Deidara lead half of the team off. It was a very stupid thing to do, but it made his job easier. The puppeteer didn't really want to win against his grandmother, though this pink-haired kunoichi was starting to annoy him. She and Chiyo were obviously planning something, whispering and glancing at him and each other. Not like they could do much.

"Sasori-sama, I know the girl." Kabuto said in a low voice, moving a bit closer to them. There was a question in his voice about the identity of the older woman, but Sasori knew he wouldn't dare express it aloud. "She is Tsunade's apprentice. A medic-nin."

"Her medical abilities won't do much against *my* poisons." he replied gruffly, narrowing Hiruko's eyes. "If you're so worried, you fight the girl. I'll fight Chiyo."

"...If you wish..." Kabuto stepped away from him, quietly drawing out a kunai. Sasori smirked, inside of his puppet; the boy wouldn't dare use chakra this early... he would be counting on the pinkette getting caught in the crossfire to take her out. *So Orochimaru's jutsu is finally catching up to him*, he thought smugly. But that was neither here nor there; here was when he finally fought his grandmother, for the first time in his life.

Chiyo took out several kunai, throwing them simultaneously. Sasori blocked them without flinching. His grandmother's eyes narrowed a bit, and she said something else to the younger kunoichi. The girl nodded, pulling her gloves on a bit tighter.

She charged at him, obviously going to try to use her monstrous strength. Kabuto darted in between them, halting her with an upward slice with his kunai, and forcing her backward. But something was off with her movements; she was *too* fast, too easily dodging the strike...

Kabuto doggedly followed her, pulling out another kunai into his other hand, trying to catch her with one of the blades. The girl dodged each strike fluidly, almost to her surprise. Chiyo stood motionless, watching. The ANBU look-alike ducked under one of her kicks, coming up with a knee to her stomach. She doubled over, and Kabuto raised his arm to plunge the kunai into her spine—when the girl was yanked backward, as if by invisible strings.

Sasori smiled. "So that's it..."

Kabuto obediently retreated back out of immediate range, while Chiyo and the girl conversed. This time, their eyes darted towards Kabuto, instead of the real threat.

"Kabuto... next time, she will try to attack you instead. Lead her into my range. I'll take her out for you." he mumbled, coiling Hiruko's tail in preparation. Chiyo's eyes glanced towards him for a moment, but soon turned back to Kabuto.

A moment later, the pink-haired medic stepped away from his grandmother, stepping up to face Kabuto again. She ran towards him, pulling her fist back for a punch, but Kabuto easily back flipped. She followed him, and he moved backwards again—close enough for Hiruko to attack.

The metal tail shot out towards the surprised girl. Not an inch from her forehead, however, it halted. Sasori jerked back in surprise, but it wouldn't move another centimeter. The girl took advantage of this, veering off of Kabuto's course and aiming for *him* with one of her super-packed punches. Hiruko's projectile-launcher was raised a split second too late, and next thing he knew, the shattered remains of his favorite puppet's back were raining down on his head.

Sasori leapt out, backpedaling into the shadows, rubbing his head where something hit it. Kabuto followed him, silent, but no doubt smug at the turn of events. "That was my *favorite*..." the redhead hissed, shaking dust and splinters out of his hair.

Chiyo was staring at him, a look of pure shock and maybe a bit of *awe* on her face. "Y-You... You haven't aged a day..."

Sasori smirked at her. "Very observant of you, grandmother."

The pinkette looked from Chiyo to Sasori and back again, confused. The elderly woman's face darkened, and she slowly withdrew two summoning scrolls from her sleeves.

Sasori looked flatly at the remains of Hiruko. He could fix it later, if he really wanted to. But Sasori wasn't too sure he did; art may be eternal, but he was getting tired of being art. Hiruko was his art, and it sure wasn't eternal. What made him any better, then? He was getting old, and he was just getting *tired*. He was tired of all of this. Nothing lasted forever, right?

"Kabuto... go check on Deidara. I'm sure he's having his own problems. I can handle these two on my own," he commanded, jerking his head towards the exit. Kabuto nodded, making towards the opening—when the pink-haired girl attacked him again. Her speed this time had increased, and her fist caught his jaw with a sickening 'crunch'. His cat mask flew off, skidding to a halt across the cavern.

Kabuto slowly got back up, forcing his jaw back into place with a cracking sound. His hand glowed blue for a brief moment, and he moved it around a bit in testing. The pink-haired girl's eyes were wide; evidently she recognized him. He smiled, though it was more like baring his teeth. He didn't bother retrieving his mask.

"That hurt, Sakura-san," he stated.

"Y-You... you were *dead*... Kakashi-sensei killed you." Her voice was barely audible, even in the stillness of the cave.

"What a touching reunion. But there are things to be taken care of—Kabuto, go." Sasori pointed towards the exit again. Kabuto ran past her, and the pink-haired girl—Sakura—tried to stop him again. This time, however, Sasori was ready. Hiruko may have been in pieces, but it was far from useless. The puppet's head was jerked into the air with chakra strings, unleashing a barrage of poisoned senbon needles that Chiyo barely had time to yank Sakura out of. Kabuto disappeared outside, leaving them alone.

Sasori smiled at the two kunoichi opposite him. He reached behind him to pull out a scroll from his back, unfurling it. In a puff of smoke, his *best* puppet appeared. The Sandaime Kazekage, his most fearsome weapon. (Obvious ones aside, of course.) His grandmother didn't flinch this time, but he could tell that she wasn't pleased to find this out. But he didn't care. They were alone, and it was his time to play.

But he was just so *tired* of all of this.

He stared flatly as his own grandmother summoned her own two puppets. His own mother and father, disturbingly enough, but he had long ago known she'd created puppets like that. Seeing their faces again, however, especially turned *against* him seemed a bit cruel, though. He didn't want to fight his parents, even if they were just lifeless puppets of them. He didn't want to destroy reminders of them, even if it was to save his own life.

Sasori was just tired of all of this.

Deidara had been successfully leading them farther and farther away from their original location for about a half hour now. *Danna's battle will be far underway by now, I'd bet. Those poor girls don't stand a chance.*

Still, he was a bit worried about his partner. He hadn't been acting normal—at least normal for him—lately. He'd seemed withdrawn, even more so. Plus, there was no telling what that woman—who was apparently his own *grandmother*—could pull out to use against him. Deidara then realized that he was more than a *bit* worried about Sasori.

"Hey, Bya-chan..." he said, glancing back towards his two pursuers. She was perched on the bird's neck, safely hidden from view by those below. She looked back at him curiously, though it was hard to tell with her rabbit mask on. "I'm going back to check on Sasori-danna, yeah."

"Wh-What?" she stuttered, her body tensing up.

"Hey, don't worry, I've figured it out, yeah. Those two won't hurt you, on account of the fact that you're a fellow Konoha-nin and they don't know your loyalties. You can wear my cloak and I'll sneak back past them. I can catch up with you later and launch a sneak attack that way, yeah." He grinned at her, but he felt a bit uneasy. He hated to leave her, especially with two very dangerous shinobi following them, but he really was worried about Sasori. "All you have to do is fly the bird for a little while. They can't catch you up here, yeah."

"U-Um... okay..." she said in a tiny voice, pushing her fingers together nervously. He grimaced, but he knew she'd be alright. Even if they *did* catch up—which they wouldn't—they wouldn't dare hurt her. As far as they knew, she had been kidnapped against her will and was going to be used as a harmless—perhaps even unwilling—decoy.

Deidara knelt down beside her, having the bird rise a few feet in the air to cover his sudden disappearance. He quickly took off his uniform, handing it to her. "You might want to use a *Henge* to look like me, too, yeah. Lead them away." he whispered, patting her on the head encouragingly. She nodded again, almost fearfully. She hastily pulled on the cloak, sliding her mask off of her face, back on top of her head under her hood. With a sign and a puff of smoke, a clone of Deidara stood there in her place, though her nervous frown almost gave her away.

"G-Good luck..." she said hesitantly.

"I'll be back, okay? Don't worry, Bya-chan!"

With an elaborately simple solution, Deidara had figured out how to get past the infamous Copy-nin. Using a *Henge* to transform himself into one of his birds, he had the faux-him throw several—not all of them harmless—down at Naruto and Kakashi. The resulting explosions were more than enough cover for him to sneak past, transforming back once they were out of sight. He then jumped onto one of the large, horizontal branches, heading back the way he'd came.

Deidara only hoped that he didn't just send her to her death. *But they won't hurt such a sweet thing...* he reassured himself mentally, glancing around. His plan was flimsy, but it wasn't like he'd take long. Just check on Sasori, possibly pick him up, since no doubt he'd be finishing up with those two soon. There was no way that two kunoichi could stand up to Sasori. ...Right?

A sudden movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Deidara whirled around on his heel, drawing a kunai—but it was only Kabuto. The silver-haired medic looked surprised to find him there, or as surprised as such a master of emotions could look. "What are you doing?"

Kabuto asked.

"What are *you* doing, yeah? I thought you were with Sasori-danna." Deidara accused suspiciously.

"He sent me to check on you. Where is Hinata—and Naruto and... Kakashi?" He glanced around, as if looking for an ambush.

Deidara scoffed at him. "Bya-chan's fine, yeah. The Kyuubi and Copy-nin are chasing after her. I was going to go check on Sasori-danna, yeah,"

"Well, he isn't in the best of moods." said Kabuto simply, rolling his shoulders back. "You go check on him, and I will catch up with Hinata-chan. I can handle Kakashi, and no doubt Naruto wouldn't dare touch a hair on her head."

Reassured, Deidara grinned at him. "Sounds like a plan, yeah."

-.-.-

Hinata could have said no. She really could have. It wasn't like she couldn't refuse Deidara. She totally had the willpower to say no to him. ...Honestly, she did. Really.

Well, not really. And when he had turned to her with his crackpot idea and that kicked-puppy tone of voice, her heart melted. Even if it was potentially suicidal, she believed that he had every right to go check on Sasori. Plus, it was cute, in a way, how Deidara had grown attached to Sasori (against his will).

As long as she kept flying, Hinata would be okay. She knew that. Naruto didn't have any long-range jutsus that she knew of, and if Kakashi did, he would have used it by now. She just had to stay airborne and wait for Deidara to come back. Simple as that.

Still, she felt nervous.

Hinata knew she wasn't a match for Naruto, especially if he *was* running on demon power. Not to mention that it was *the* Hatake Kakashi accompanying him. But even such infamous shinobi had to have weaknesses, and one of them must be their lack of long-range combative ninjutsu. She snuck a shy look over her shoulder, seeing Kakashi telling something—undoubtedly calming—to his pupil. Naruto didn't seem to want to listen, but he was nodding thoughtfully. No doubt making some sort of plan.

She shivered a bit, imagining herself on the receiving end of one of Naruto's plans. It wasn't a role she'd ever pictured herself in, but life rarely worked out the way one envisioned.

Hinata smiled a bit to herself. She'd be fine. Deidara wouldn't have left her if there was an impending danger, and it *was* true that if she had the time to counter, she could put them both in a genjutsu and flee. She wasn't so sure about Kakashi, but she had enough faith in her genjutsu skills to be able to place her former crush in one.

Or I can always use the ignore me jutsu... they don't know it's me, so I'll vanish from their sight, she thought contemplatively. That was a practically fool-proof plan. There was no way that even Kakashi's Sharingan could spot her then, when Itachi couldn't spot her (right away) when he was looking for her. She could be halfway back to Amegakure before they even realized what had

happened.

The heiress looked back at them again. Naruto's eyes were blue again—a startling development—but his grin had stayed rather demonic. He glanced over at Kakashi, whose hands were in signs. Hinata's eyes widened a bit, and she suppressed another shudder. He was planning something... but what? His Sharingan was closed, so it must have something to do with that eye.

Then several things happened at once.

A loud, almost buzzing, sound filled the air, and the air around her started to warp and distort. Hinata gave a small scream, the bird below her staying firmly on course. Then she realized that this was *Deidara's* bird; she had little control over it, if any. But whatever this attack was, she knew she had to get away from it *now*.

She felt a pull on the air around her, as if she was being sucked towards something. Desperately she tried to get the clay below her to obey her, attempting to force it downwards. In the trees, with her genjutsu, she would disappear completely. (Unless, of course, she got caught in Kakashi's jutsu and died.)

But as suddenly as it started, the buzzing stopped. Hinata didn't have time to react to that. Her bird was going down into the forest, but not quickly enough; Naruto and a clone had appeared beside her. *It was a distraction!* her mind shrieked, forcing her body to get away from his *Rasengan* as quickly as possible. She turned and jumped off of the bird, landing on a large log below.

Hinata instantly turned, expecting Kakashi to come upon her, but she noticed a very peculiar thing.

The Copy-nin was no where to be seen.

She wasn't going to wait around for him to appear, of course, and jumped up onto the nearest ledge just as Naruto landed behind her. The bird soared over them, crashing into the forest ahead of them. Hinata needed to get to that clay; she could make her own bird and then outrun them all.

But as her sandals touched the grass, things seemed to speed up again. Naruto was evidently much faster than before, already having caught up with her. He wrapped his arms around her chest in a crushing one-armed bear hug, the other reaching up to grab her throat.

Kakashi stood in front of her, arms crossed. He gave a sharp nod to Naruto, who shifted her in his grasp so that her arms were pushed behind and above her, successfully cutting off all of her seals and jutsu. This was *not* how she expected this to go.

She struggled in his grasp, albeit a bit weakly.

"Who are you?" It wasn't a question; it was a demand. Hinata's eyes instantly went to her sandals instinctively. She may have still looked like Deidara, but Hyuuga senses kicked in and she was forced to hide her eyes.

"Kakashi-sensei, why are we interrogating him?! Let's just slit his throat and get Gaara—"

"No. This is not the blonde man we were chasing earlier." Hinata felt herself paling. *How* did he know that? Naruto's grip on her tightened a little.

"What...?"

The Hyuuga clamped her mouth closed and kept her face downward, eyes tightly closed. She would *not* give up anything else, though a *Henge* wasn't going to do much to protect her at this

point. Oh, if she had only learned how to cast genjutsu like Itachi, without the use of seals...

"We both saw him create that bird. Based on this person's behavior when confronted with my Mangekyou, he didn't have control of it. I am not going to waste my chakra on an imposter." Kakashi said, almost stubbornly. She winced, forgetting how transparent that behavior must have made her. No wonder he cut off that bizarre jutsu.

"So then... who is this?" Naruto asked, yanking her up a little taller by the arms.

"That is what I'd like to know. Talk, before we are forced to take more drastic measures. I do not wish to harm you."

His last statement struck fear into her heart. *He-He knows...*

"*What?* Kakashi-sensei, this is an Akatsuki member! We *want* to harm him!" Naruto growled dangerously. She felt an angry prickle of chakra accompanying it, no doubt a signal to his demonic tendencies.

"Drop the illusion... Hinata."

Naruto let go of her as if burned, and from the raw shock of being such a letdown, and perhaps just a little bit from the resignation she felt obliged to, she obeyed him and dropped the *Henge*. If Kakashi had figured it out, it'd be no use wasting chakra and keeping it up.

And so for the first time in three years, Hyuuga Hinata turned to face Naruto. Deidara's Akatsuki uniform felt big on her, and she hesitantly put up a fist to cover her mouth, feeling her face heat up. The look on his face was heartbreaking. He looked confused, hurt, a little angry... and betrayed.

Kakashi ruined the moment, however. She jumped slightly when she felt his hand on her shoulder, yanking her backwards and turning her back to face him. Instinctively she didn't look at his Sharingan. "Well?"

"I-I-I—"

"Hinata, were you put up to this?" he asked sternly, ignoring Naruto's bewilderment. She knew what he was trying to do, but it wouldn't work. Her job now was to try to escape, and if not that, then to buy time. Kakashi wanted to know if she was still a Konoha-nin, but she wasn't.

Hinata really wasn't. It was the first time she'd admitted it to herself, but it was true nonetheless. It had been true for months. She felt no longing for her home, her clan, or even some of the people she used to know. She had a new home, and it was nothing like Konohagakure.

"Answer me." His voice had taken on a commanding tone, and his grasp on her shoulder tightened a bit. "Hinata, *were you put up to this unwillingly?*"

She kept her eyes on her sandals, somewhat thankful that she hadn't painted her toenails purple. (Her fingernails, however, were another story.) Such little details wouldn't go unnoticed by such an elite ninja as the Copy-nin, and it was only the fact that she was wearing Deidara's cloak that was probably saving her. Any hint that it was remotely affiliated with her personally would have killed her.

"H-Hey... wait a minute..." Naruto said weakly, the same hurt expression still on his tanned face. Hinata winced a bit at it, willing herself not to fall for him. "It—It was *Hinata-chan*? Sh-She killed Gaara...?"

"No, Naruto. That's what I'm trying to figure out," the white-haired jounin said quietly. "Hinata, answer my question or I'll be forced to take measures."

"I-I..."

"Hinata-chan... you *are* still a Konoha kunoichi, *aren't* you?" Naruto asked critically. Evidently he was beginning to get his footing back after being knocked down a notch or two by the unfortunate surprise. She shrunk down a bit, though Kakashi's hands on her shoulders prevented most movement.

"...I don't... know..." she whispered under her breath. She wasn't made for lying in crucial moments like this; she'd just have to roll with it. Buy time and wait for Deidara. Try to escape. The heiress then noticed that no one was holding her hands apart any more. Naruto had relinquished his hold on them, and she was free to make seals—provided she could beat Kakashi to it.

It was worth a shot.

As quickly as she could, Hinata brought both hands up and started making the seals for her *Houtteoko Onore* jutsu. She jumped backwards out of the way as Kakashi lunged for her to stop her, almost bowling Naruto over, but managed to complete the hand signs necessary. (Thankfully it wasn't abnormally long.) Hinata felt herself disappearing into the forest, and based on the expressions of her two would-be attackers, she wasn't visible.

She knew she only had a sparse few seconds; they *were* looking for her, after all, and the genjutsu was created to count on the fact that the enemy wasn't, but she would be a moving target and hopefully they wouldn't know *where* to look. She channeled all of her desperation into not being seen, with any luck boosting the ignore me jutsu's effects.

Unfortunately, Hinata didn't have much luck that day.

Not to mention the fact that Kakashi wasn't only the Copy-nin and knew exactly what the genjutsu was, but he was a dog summoner and had the nose of a canine as well.

Within seconds he was after her again, Naruto trailing in his wake. Hinata ran for all she was worth, hoping for a miracle or to find the fallen clay bird. If she could get to some clay, at least she would be airborne again.

But again, she didn't take into account the fact that Kakashi was a genius. He had obviously realized that she was going for the bird as well, and sent Naruto to cut her off with some shadow clones. Next thing she knew, Hinata was captured again, struggling vainly against two *Kage Bunshin*.

"H-Hinata-chan! Calm down!" he shouted, trying to keep her still.

"Naruto, it's no use." Kakashi looked down on her disapprovingly, crossing his arms. "She's become a missing-nin now."

Her white eyes widened slightly as he took out a kunai.

"And it's our job to eliminate missing-nin from the world. Especially missing-nin who were once Konoha ninja."

Now Hinata was pressing back against the Naruto clone, trying to get away as Kakashi advanced. "N-No..." This was *not* how this mission was supposed to go!

"Wait, Kakashi-sensei, do we really need to *kill* her?" Naruto asked, still somewhat dazed from the whole experience. "Can't we just, uh, take her back to Konoha and give her to Tsunade-baachan or something...?"

"Naruto, no. It's a disappointment, but Hinata has chosen to side with the Akatsuki. Do you want her going free if she had a hand in Gaara's kidnapping and murder?"

Realizing Naruto was the weaker link, Hinata desperately tried to quell the rising panic and reason with him. "N-Naruto-kun... pl-please, don't—"

"Kakashi-sensei, this doesn't seem right—"

"Naruto, you want to become Hokage, don't you?" This shut the whiskered blonde up quick. "Being Hokage means making tough decisions for the good of the village. Now if you were Hokage and this was the problem, what would you do? Let the Akatsuki have a former Konoha kunoichi, and a Hyuuga no less? Give them the Byakugan and potentially all of its secrets? Or would you kill a former friend and save your clan and village?"

Kakashi wasn't a genius for nothing. With that simple faux-hypothetical situation, he had gained his student's trust once more, and Hinata was going to pay for it. (Of course the situation wasn't at all as cut and dried as he made it out to be... wasn't it?)

She tried to get away again, but only managed in succeeding in getting herself stabbed in the shoulder. It hurt, but she just bit her lip and kept trying to get out of Naruto's arms—a place just a year ago she would have given anything to be in. Irony was cruel sometimes. She had to do something, *quick*, to get him to let go of her. Something shocking and something he would never expect.

"Let go of me, you—you *demon*!"

Something like that. Naruto let go of her immediately, and she only glanced at him for the briefest moment to see the look of pure pain. Hinata squeezed the tears out of her eyes before she could start crying and jumped up into the nearest tree. She activated her Byakugan, spotting the fallen bird instantly—as well as Kakashi behind her... and Naruto still standing in the clearing, shaking slightly.

She couldn't believe that she'd said that to him, *that* of all things. But survival was the main thing here. She couldn't afford to try to mend her broken heart now. She had to ditch the emotions and become a real ninja, at least until she could get away and cry later.

Unfortunately, again, Kakashi was the better ninja. He had caught up to her already, and was just reaching out a hand to yank her back and plunge the kunai into her neck—when a foot came out of nowhere and crashed into the Copy-nin's head. The two went flying back off of the path into the ground, leaving Hinata to scamper off towards her escape.

She checked with her Byakugan to see who her savior was. Silver hair, ponytail, glasses and an ANBU cloak. Kakashi no doubt would be astonished to see the man he had killed three years ago standing in front of him, but she could thank Kabuto later.

Because a red-eyed, dark-whiskered Kyuubi Jinchuuriki was racing her to the bird, and he was catching up fast. Hinata tried to speed up; she wouldn't be able to get away from him again, especially when he knew what her target was. She had a head start and a shorter path towards it, but his sudden burst of speed was no doubt Bijuu-powered. He would beat her to the clay unless she thought of something fast.

-.-.-

The look on Kakashi's face was worth it. This wasn't quite how he expected their reunion to be, but Kabuto would take what he could get. "Y-You... You're supposed to be *dead*... You can't be alive," he said quietly.

"Since when have I followed such rules?" Kabuto asked simply, pushing his glasses up further on his nose. "Maybe I didn't *want* to be dead."

Kakashi's eyes narrowed a bit. "Of course... Orochimaru would have resurrected you." Kabuto didn't reply. "He wouldn't have let his *favorite* die on him, especially since he didn't have Sasuke."

The medic-nin just offered him a strained smile. "Orochimaru-sama is dead now, so let's move onto better and brighter things. Like what you're going to do now."

"What do you mean? I'm going to kill you—again—and end this with these two Akatsuki," he replied, a bit hastily. Kakashi was getting nervous. Kabuto's smile darkened a bit into a smirk, and he narrowed his eyes a little bit.

"You won't get that far, I can assure you. Do you really think you have the heart to kill me *again*? ...Not to mention that poor Naruto-kun will go completely into Kyuubi-mode if you allow him to tear apart poor Hinata-chan. He can't handle that kind of stress, especially after losing Gaara-kun. Do you want to deal with a Jinchuuriki's rampage?"

Kakashi stayed silent.

"Sakura-san and Sasori-sama's grandmother are going to be dead soon. Don't you want to save as many as you can? You can walk away from me right now and save them, and I will help you by stopping Naruto-kun. Doesn't that sound like an easy plan?"

"Kabuto... you know me. Why do you insist on doing this to both of us?" Kakashi asked wearily. Kabuto instantly frowned, a bit irked that he couldn't continue to bait the man. "You're only hurting yourself by trying to hurt me..."

The younger ninja ran forward, but his swing with a kunai was blocked effortlessly by Kakashi. Kabuto instead then swung his other arm around in a flat punch, but it was caught by the Copy-nin's hand. He stared up at him, hissing, "Even after all of those years, Kakashi, *you* still don't know a thing about *me*. You're a fool."

"I am," he conceded, bringing up his knee to jab Kabuto in the stomach. The medic felt most of the wind knocked out of him as he doubled over, though Kakashi still had both of his arms. "That's why I am going to fix my foolish mistakes and take you back to Konoha, once and for all. You and whatever Akatsuki member you're affiliated with currently are going to be arrested and executed. Like you should have been."

"You've already executed me. By all means, that should have cleared me of all previous charges." Kabuto shot back with a dry laugh. He tried to kick Kakashi, but the older man easily evaded it. "I had no hand in Gaara's capture or murder. I am as innocent as *you*."

"Then the execution will still happen."

Kabuto didn't have the chakra to deal with Kakashi right now, and in a plain taijutsu fight, the latter would win every time. He needed to regroup and formulate another plan, preferably one that kept the Copy-nin busy and away from him. He could use both Hinata and Naruto for that, but how? Unless Deidara decided to come back, Kabuto would have to figure out how to lure the two kids back without endangering the heiress or himself.

But first things first. He disappeared out of Kakashi's grasp with a *Kawarimi*, rubbing his wrists a bit. That would leave bruises. The Copy-nin let him stand back, away from him, just staring at him. Kabuto hated that stare; it was too... shallow. Kakashi was too easy to read, and he knew it. He was letting Kabuto get a handle on his emotions in a vain attempt to touch the boy's own humanity and use it against him, but the medic-nin wasn't going to let him do that again.

Kabuto shifted from foot to foot, watching how the jounin followed his movements with his Sharingan. He may have been going easy on him, but it didn't mean he was slacking. And this time he didn't have any handy distractions to utilize. This was a sticky situation indeed. He brushed a bit of hair out of his eyes, pushing up his glasses again. "You can't win in the current situation, Kakashi-san," he informed him politely. Kakashi at least deserved some form of civility, even if it was mocking.

"You can't, either."

"So it's a stalemate?" Kabuto asked, his eyes glittering behind the glasses. It had been *years* since he'd seen Kakashi, and while this wasn't the ideal reunion, flustering the great Copy-nin was just too much fun. Not to mention the fact that the spy savored the fact that only *he* could make Kakashi so nervous.

But it didn't matter. Not really, at least in the grand scheme of things. That's what made this game so fun.

--.-

The only thing keeping him alive right now was sheer stubbornness and annoyance at the pinkette's evident proficiency with poisons. Or rather, her skill with antidotes. Somehow, *somehow*, she had the ability and time to extract a bit of his own poison from a *corpse*, and then get the antidote by that. It was infuriating. Sasori wasn't going to lose to *that*; it was a matter of pride at this point.

His grandmother he could care less about. She was old and skilled, yes, but her weapons were just *puppets*. Normal puppets. His far out skilled hers any day. But she was using his own parents, for gods' sake, against him as well as her legendary ten. And then the girl who had *destroyed the puppet of the Sandaime Kazekage* and somehow managed to avoid his own poison's effects—it seemed to be temporary, at least—was still alive. He shouldn't have dismissed Kabuto so quickly, but it was no matter now.

He would kill them both himself.

Or, at least, Sakura...

Sasori swore, whipping his hand to his right, and with it, the flames that he was throwing at them both. The fire was just barely missing her, licking at her boots and her ridiculously short skirt.

Chiyo was still probably controlling her, at least to some degree. He was running out of fuel, but he wanted to scorch these two *so* badly. He'd at least like that small comfort.

Switching over to water power, he cut through the stone in the makeshift arena cleanly in a vain attempt to get either kunoichi. Rocks shattered and fell around him as he doggedly followed his grandmother with a watery knife. Still, her age hadn't slowed her down, and she appeared to be a harder target than he'd thought to score a hit on. He decided to change tactics, and attack the Konoha-nin again. Sasori growled in annoyance; he *still* couldn't get a hit in long-range like this.

He had to move in closer.

Sasori kept his stream of water drilling a hole through the rock Sakura was hiding behind, edging closer. The stone cracked loudly, and he forced himself into a sprint, aiming to catch her as she fled the breaking rock. His first body, still pinned to the side of the open-aired cave, caught his eye for a moment and he faltered. Unfortunately, he hesitated just long enough for the pinkette to get away.

Even he, Sasori of the Red Sands, had been forced to use his back-up body in this fight. Sasori's eyes were stuck on the useless puppet, its eyes and heart blank. He, *he* who was art, in theory *killed* himself. Art was eternal—but as the puppeteer looked around, gazing at the wreckage of puppets (his and his grandmother's alike) and the carnage of the battle so far, he began to doubt his beliefs. If art lasted forever, and his ninjutsu of choice was his art... where did that leave him?

This mass of wood and metal certainly wasn't anywhere near everlasting. Neither was he. The body on the wall was evidence enough of that. Sasori didn't react when Sakura flitted by him to get to Chiyo, saying something about her antidote. He ignored her, in fact.

Sasori was getting old, he knew that. Especially for a shinobi. He was almost forty, and while he was as powerful as ever, he just wasn't getting anywhere in life. Yes, he was in the Akatsuki, and yes, he wouldn't ever be killed unless he got sloppy or chose to die. But he had reached the pinnacle. There wasn't anything more, even for a masterpiece such as himself.

Sasori was just tired.

So with a lidded, tired stare, he turned heavily to face his grandmother and her living puppet. He would kill them both. Then he could sort out his feelings and do what he had to do later, on his own. The redhead stepped forward, wrenching a katana out of a nearby puppet. The poison gleamed on the blade brightly, as if anticipating its fate. He would end this now, with two stabs to the heart...

First, however, he needed to get Sakura out of the way. The metal coil in his stomach shot out and wrapped around her shoulders, throwing her behind him. That wouldn't kill her, but she couldn't stop Chiyo's death then. Sasori ran his wooden finger over the sharp edge, grinning a bit. "Goodbye... grandmother."

He charged her. Chiyo raised her chakra shield once more, but it wouldn't be any use. She knew it, too. He pulled the blade back for a stab, aimed at the kneeling woman's heart...

And instead he struck something else.

And it most certainly wasn't a heart.

Sakura had flung herself in between Chiyo and the katana's point, taking the attack fearlessly. It hadn't hit her chest, but it was still a fatal blow. Sasori grimaced a bit, tilting it up a bit to try to pull

it back out. The medic-nin, however, ignored the pain and turned to her elder, mumbling, "Chiyo-baasama..."

"Enough of this. If you're so willing to die, then I'll kill you first," Sasori spat, watching in disdain as she coughed up a generous amount of blood. Her hands, however, weakly reached up to the blade lodged in her stomach. They started to glow palely, trying ineffectively to restore lost and dead cells. It wouldn't do much with the metal in her, let alone his poisons. And she didn't have any of her irritatingly handy antidote left.

Chiyo, however, did.

His grandmother coughed, and with a wheeze, pushed the syringe into Sakura's leg. Both of the others stared at her, in shock. "B-But Chiyo-baasama..."

"Stupid old woman. You are already poisoned and she is just going to die, anyway. That was a *useless* thing to do," he spat venomously. And to prove his point, he pushed his forearm out of its socket, withdrawing a blade attached to the stump of his arm. "You can't save her, and you can't save yourself!"

Sasori leapt back, to get charging speed. With any luck he could gore them both through with one stroke. Too late, Chiyo's hands raised to try to retaliate. Sakura's eyes just widened, but she couldn't gather the energy to move. He pulled his hand back for the killing strike—and he saw two blurs out of the corners of his eyes.

Sasori stopped himself. He knew what was coming; he could read his grandmother like an open book. She had managed to get the seal to stop his chakra on the ground below him, and now sending in two of her still-working puppets to finish him. If they had been any old puppets, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. But these... were his parents.

So Sasori of the Red Sands halted in his charge, just for the second long enough for wooden dolls of his own deceased parents to come embrace him with cold metal. *Art may be eternal... but I was a fool to believe that I could make myself into art. I'm just tired of the lies. ...I'm sorry, Deidara, but looks like you'll be happier with the Hyuuga as your partner.*

Sasori felt the swords pierce his body.

Only something was wrong.

They were at the wrong angles.

His first instinct was to look down at himself. One blade was sticking harmlessly out of his collarbone, missing the mark completely. The second, his mother's, just barely missed his heart container, only scratching the surface of the hard wood.

His second instinct, was, of course, to find out *why*, and *what* had stopped his death.

Slowly, and almost dreadfully, Sasori looked up.

Deidara was standing above him, one foot planting solidly on each of the puppet's heads, holding them far enough away from the redhead to make them miss. He had a kunai in his mouth and two birds in his hands. And if looks could kill, the two kunoichi would be six feet under. Sasori had never seen his partner so angry, and was more than a bit surprised when the blonde turned downward to glare at *him*. His look seemed to say '*what the hell were you thinking?!*'.

Sasori couldn't reply, though not from surprise. Because at that moment, he finally felt the jerk

downward that he had been hoping for, discovering that his mother's katana hadn't missed. He looked down, eyes wide, unable to stop the trickle of blood that forced its way out of his mouth. "How... foolish..." he murmured, almost silently, feeling the actual physical *pain* that he hadn't felt for over twenty years.

His vision suddenly blurred into darkness and the last thing he heard was a shout of "Danna!" before he had the sensation of falling.

Finally. Maybe Deidara was right. Maybe art isn't eternal, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Sasori goes down. Hinata faces a demon. Kabuto fights with his past. And in the midst of it all, the Akatsuki celebrates another Bijuu sealed. Is the celebration deserved?

Vanity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"This is a stalemate and we all know it, yeah. I'll let you two live if you let us go right now. Otherwise, you two will both die right now."

-.-.-

Their return to Amegakure was loud.

And not in an entirely good way.

Sasori was either unconscious or dead, since it was hard to tell since he was a *puppet*. The revelation had shocked both Hinata and Deidara, but looking at the past hints the redhead had dropped, it made sense. No one could quite figure out whether or not he was alive, at least until Konan showed up. Sasori was alive, if barely.

Hinata didn't quite understand most of the specifics of what had happened. Most of it she had gotten from the leader's rant; Deidara was unusually silent about it. All she knew is that he returned with a puppet Sasori, who was bleeding for the first time she had ever seen, and distracted Naruto long enough for her to escape relatively unharmed.

Aside from Pein's constant shouting at someone or another, most of the other members greeted them as returning war heroes. Deidara was finally really accepted into the fold, and she was deemed a type of mascot, almost, for the moment. Hinata wasn't quite sure she liked all of the sudden attention, especially since most of them just wanted to ask her questions about Sasori's condition.

When Hidan got the bright idea to ask Kabuto, all he received in reply was an icy, "Sasori-sama was a fool for acting like that."

Soon it was the common consensus that Sasori was not only a nut job—now all of the other dragons also knew of the fact that he was, indeed, a true *artist*—but that he had tried to commit suicide. Konan had long since disappeared with the wooden body, and Deidara had likewise vanished. Hinata felt like running, herself, but when she noticed that Kabuto was acting just as skittish as she was, she decided to stay. If only to keep him company. He seemed a bit down after the whole fiasco, anyway.

What was probably the worst was that they had decided to stage this noisy reunion just inside the village's gates. Every civilian and ninja in the city had to have heard most of it by now, and what rumors that would spawn, Hinata could only dread.

She zoned out, tapping her fingers on the side of her chin. Kabuto was leaning against the wall beside her, eyes closed and a rather nasty scowl on his face. Many of the other Akatsuki members were milling about, mostly waiting for news of *something*. The air was tense, almost excited. Pein was still shouting at the top of his lungs, currently something about ripping out his piercings and stabbing someone with them.

"You!" He turned suddenly, but Hinata paid him no heed. He had been verbally assaulting Tobi for the last few minutes, and had probably decided to switch to another unfortunate victim. "*What the hell happened to my member?!*" Next thing she knew, the heiress was hauled up by her throat until she was eye level with the leader of the Akatsuki.

"I-I-I-I wasn't th-there, s-sir! I w-was fighting N-Naruto during th-that time!" she gasped out, more than a bit surprised that his rage had been turned on her. She wasn't even a member of his group!

Pein dropped her back onto the wet grass, the storm clouds above them crackling with ominous lightning. Hinata's hands instantly went to her throat, rubbing the bruises and gasping for air. Her heart was thundering in her chest; she hadn't been expecting something like that.

Above her, she heard Kabuto say, "Don't look at me. I was fighting Kakashi." On any other day he'd probably be hit, at the very least, for his indifferent tone. The ginger-haired man spared him, for whatever reason, however. Hinata had to wonder if something had happened between him and Kakashi that would cause him to act so rebelliously.

She risked a look upward, one hand still on her neck. Pein's ringed eyes were locked onto something on a nearby rooftop. Hinata looked up as well, and winced in sympathy; it was Deidara.

He was soaked, and his hair had fallen out of his ponytail. He jumped down from the roof, landing in a puddle and splashing the closest. (Not that it mattered in the pouring rain.) Pein instantly seized him by the front of his uniform, hauling him up several inches off the ground. Deidara was probably one of the two who knew what was actually going on, and he'd just had the bright idea to come back to get interrogated.

"What?" he asked dully, frowning.

"What do you mean, '*what*'?" The leader was deceptively calm, and if Hinata had valued her life any less, she almost would have warned the blonde of the impending storm.

"Where's Sasori-danna, yeah?" Deidara asked. Hinata hung her head; wrong question to ask.

"Hmm, I wonder where he could be. I would say he is with Konan, but he would only be with her if something had happened on a certain mission involving a certain blonde, Iwa, explosive artist. And said blonde, Iwa, explosive artist was the last man to see him alive. I wonder if that would bode particularly *well*, hmm?" Pein snapped savagely. Hinata was almost a little touched by the loyalty he was giving his Akatsuki member, but it was overshadowed by her fear for Deidara. They already didn't trust him, and she just realized how incriminating it could look.

"He—He's dead?" Deidara didn't seem fazed by the outburst, but a nervous swallow betrayed him.

"How should *I* know?" The blonde in his grasp didn't dare reply. Slowly, the leader lowered him until his sandals were on the ground once more, and he let go of the cloak. "...Debriefing. Now." He turned to look at the two subordinates sharply.

"N-No. Bya-chan wasn't there, yeah. Neither was Kabuto, so they wouldn't have seen anything," he replied immediately, a bit protectively. Pein shrugged, and with a gesture, disappeared into the rain with Deidara.

After they assumed they were safely out of hearing range, it was almost like the group let out a collective breath. "Wow. Deidara probably just saved your lives, huh?" Kisame asked with a grin. "I've never seen Leader-sama so worked up."

"That is because until Orochimaru, we had never lost a member. And it was Deidara who killed

him, so it evened itself out. But if someone could take out Sasori, then we have a new threat on our hands. Deidara was planned; this wasn't." Kakuzu said sourly, crossing his arms. He turned to Hinata, crouching down beside her. "As it stands, I think we need to hold a little debriefing of our own."

"That won't be necessary." Konan's voice behind them made several of the members jump guiltily. Her hands were folded neatly in front of her stomach, and while her hair was sticking wetly to her face, she didn't seem upset in the least. "I think you could all just ask Sasori-san what happened. These two subordinates do not need to be harassed with details they don't know."

"Sasori's awake?"

"He's *alive*?"

"Did he say anything?"

Konan held up a hand to calm them, smiling vapidly. "Yes to all three of the prevalent questions. But... where's Deidara-san?"

"Leader-sama hauled his sorry ass out of here for a debriefing." Hidan volunteered, vaguely gesturing in the direction they had gone.

"...Ah. That's a pity." After that distant statement, the woman paused for a moment. Then she turned, without another word, and walked away.

"A-Ah, Konan, aren't you going to tell us what the hell happened? Aren't you worried?" Kakuzu called, stopping her in her tracks. She turned to look over her shoulder, smiling again in that mysterious way of hers.

"Not at all. There isn't anything Pein can't fix."

"Why were you only looking for Deidara-san? If you have Sasori-san, then you have the answers —" Tobi started fretfully, but Konan silenced him with a shake of her head.

"I have a vague understanding of what has happened, that is all. And I was only looking for Deidara-san because Sasori-san asked for him. I have no interest in a biased view of the incident."

-.-.-

Deidara tried his best to answer all of the leader's questions, he really did. But anger was beginning to seep into his replies, and he was getting more and more distressed as time went on. *I want to know where Sasori-danna is, damn it, not answer these stupid questions...!*

"And you decided to leave a weak chuunin with the Copy-nin and a Jinchuuriki?"

"Yes, Leader-sama." It hadn't been his brightest idea, admittedly, but judging from what he'd seen, it had been a good one to go back to check on the Suna artist.

"And *why* would you decide to do such a thing?"

"Danna hadn't been acting normal, yeah, so I thought he was nervous about fighting some really strong guy from Suna." That was only a half-truth at best, but Deidara didn't want to get into

nebulous emotions just then.

"Hadn't been acting normal, eh?" Pein asked with a tight smile. "Do tell."

"Uh..." He stalled for a few moments, trying to come up with a suitable answer. He really had no idea what Sasori's motives had been, and he didn't want to get him into unnecessary trouble. "He was almost... *fretting*, yeah. I guess he was just nervous about the mission..."

The leader sighed, as if sensing the lie. "Deidara... have I ever given you a reason *not* to trust me?"

The Iwa-nin stayed silent.

"You say Sasori was fighting an elder from the Sand and a Konoha kunoichi, whom you have seen before."

"Yeah. She's really strong, but Sasori-danna could have handled her with his eyes closed. She's only a chuunin, yeah."

"And is there any reason whatsoever that, when facing these two, he would choose to die rather than fight?" he asked quietly. Deidara winced. They had gotten to the point of the question; whether or not Sasori had tried to commit suicide.

"I-I don't know... yeah. You'd better ask him. All I know is that when I got there, there were two puppets attacking him and he was just standing *still*, waiting for them, yeah. I just stopped it." He hurried through the explanation, probably damning his partner but saving his own skin in the process.

"...I see."

There was a long, rather uncomfortable silence. Deidara wondered if the leader was merely thinking, or if he was waiting for something else. As to what that may have been, the Iwa-nin couldn't guess. He shifted slightly. Was he dismissed? Or was this some obscure, rather idiotic, form of mental torture? Deidara stood up, bowing a little to Pein, and exited the debriefing room rather hastily.

He was stopped at the door. "Deidara... welcome to the Akatsuki."

--.-

Deidara found out the meaning of the leader's phrase only after most of it was said and done.

Sasori was, for lack of a better phrase, put on suicide watch. The Iwa-nin was commanded to watch him at all times, and to stop any more stupid actions until he caught his own Jinchuuriki. After that, the leader stated, he was free to do as he wished.

This, of course, didn't bode particularly well with Sasori. Then again, he was in a worse mood than usual, snapping at anyone and, judging it on the fact that it was common knowledge that he was a puppet, occasionally pulling out a weapon to physically assault someone. Three Ame chuunin had died before Deidara decided to drag him somewhere more secluded.

The Hyuuga kunoichi accompanied them both, but Kabuto had disappeared. Deidara wasn't overly

disappointed. "U-Um... where are we going?" she asked timidly, following them both.

"Out in the forest? I dunno, yeah. Sasori-danna's in a bad enough mood and I don't think Leader-sama would like it if he depleted any more of the Rain's forces, yeah."

"Oh, bullshit," the redhead said in disgust. "Leader-sama has the Akatsuki. He doesn't need a bunch of Ame-nin. He only wanted the social status of leading his own country, not the power." Deidara draped an arm around his shoulder, grinning.

"Well I'll have to save your life more often, yeah. You're just a ray of sunshine, you know that?" Sasori pushed him away, into the kunoichi. She frowned at him, but didn't say anything, and instead just stared at him.

No one aside from Pein had dared broach the subject of the mission with him yet. Sasori was probably counting on that fact, but Deidara had his guesses. Probably something to do with the secrets he was supposed to find out from his partner. Of course, one of his probable *biggest* secrets had been given away in the form of the knowledge of just *what* he was, but that was beside the point. It really only brought up more questions anyway, none of which seemed suitable for the current situation.

Of course, Sasori had done enough things to him in the past that he wasn't happy with. So this was just a chance to get even.

Deidara turned and leaned down so that he was eye-level with the shorter ninja. "Say, danna. If you're a puppet, does that mean you're made of wood?"

Sasori gave him a flat look. "Yes. Now go away; I want to go kill some more people."

"Uh, no. But anyway... how come you don't *look* like you're made of wood?" Deidara continued on persistently. He ruffled his scarlet hair, much to his annoyance. "Your hair feels real, if wet, and your hands and head feel like they're skin stuff, yeah."

"Because I am vain now leave me alone." Sasori replied hastily, narrowing his eyes. "Injured or not, I can still fight you with my eyes closed."

The blonde beamed at him, straightening up again. "Well you're just a grumpy little bastard, yeah. But I guess now I know why you don't bleed and you protected your heart rather than head in our fight. Right, Bya-chan?"

She gave him a look that very clearly said '*don't get me in to this conversation*'.

Deidara probably would have pestered him with more questions, had Tobi not arrived at that point. They were near the city limits, and almost into the relative safety of the forest, but the masked ninja would have none of it. "Sasori-san! I'm so glad that you're up again! Just in time to come to the celebration!" he said excitedly with a grin in his voice.

"What celebration, yeah?" Deidara asked, clueless to the situation.

"We're celebrating sealing another Bijuu! We have one every time we capture one, but since it is your and Hidan-san's first Bijuu sealed, everyone is very excited!"

"Then I will take my leave now. I've skipped the last two, and I have no intention of coming to this one. *Especially* as alcohol has little to no effect on me." This last statement seemed to be directed only to Tobi, and he rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"Alcohol?" The Iwa-nin perked up expectantly.

"Yeah, since this time we have Amegakure, Leader-sama commandeered one of the bars. Hidan-san and Kisame-san want Deidara-san to come down quickly so they can have a drinking contest." Tobi chirped in reply. "And Hinata-chan, you'll come too, right?"

"U-Um, I'm not old enough to dr—"

"Not cool!" he interrupted, grabbing her hand. "Hinata-chan, you're a missing-nin now! You don't have to follow such lame rules like that!" Without another word to either of the men, Tobi, dragging the rather surprised girl, ran back down the path towards Amegakure.

"So... alcohol?" Deidara asked after a beat.

"No. Leave me alone."

"Mm, no, yeah. Leader-sama says that if you die, *I* die. He thought it was rather funny to tell me that..."

"..." Sasori looked away, his expression perfectly blank.

"Come on, Sasori-danna. It won't hurt you to socialize, and I'm *sure* everyone will be happy to see you alive and well, yeah." The blonde paused for a moment, decided on whether or not to rub salt in the wound. Eventually he decided to. "And afterwards... we can have a talk about all those crappy little secrets you've been hinting at, yeah."

"It's your funeral." Sasori replied coldly.

-.-.-

Happy did not a drunk Hinata make. She was practically forced by Tobi—and Hidan, unfortunately—to drink several drinks, most of which she couldn't even begin to identify. She was busy worrying about her liver and whatever brain damage she'd probably sustain when Deidara *finally* chose to come to her rescue.

Unfortunately, he was just as drunk as she.

No, wait. He was *completely* plastered.

"To another successful sealing! Only six more demons to go!" the leader called, standing on top of his chair. The whole bar, many of them Ame ninja who had come in because of the sight of the leader, roared in approval. Well, Hinata thought it was approval. At this point, it was just loud and made her head hurt.

"B-Bya-chan... you're-you're pretty, you know that...?" Deidara slurred, draping an arm around her. Hinata shrugged him off, trying to find a cold glass of water to clear her head. She grabbed the nearest clear glass—she was beyond caring whose it was—and took a large swallow. Unfortunately, the alcohol burned her throat and she ended up coughing most of it back up.

"I-I don't feel so well," she mumbled to no one in particular. No one heard her, anyway, as most of them were watching a chugging match between Hidan and Kakuzu. Hidan eventually won, though

only by kicking his partner in the side and causing him to choke. Pein forced them apart before things could get bloody, and the Jashinist made his way to the bar, sitting on a stool near Hinata. Itachi appeared out of the crowd, which seemed to be growing, and sat between them. He moved his hair off of his shoulder, ordering some drink she'd never heard of.

Hinata set her cheek down on the cool, if sticky, surface of the bar. Her eyelids felt heavy, but she wasn't particularly sleepy. Nauseous, if anything. The heiress vowed that she would never, *ever* touch another glass of anything even remotely alcoholic ever again.

"You don't look well." Itachi said tactlessly, coolly sipping his drink.

"...I probably d-don't," she agreed vaguely.

"She just can't handle her drink." Hidan joined in loudly. His voice only hurt her head, and she closed her eyes. "She ain't a particularly petite thing, but I guess it doesn't take much to get a kunoichi fuckin' hammered these days."

"Konan probably wouldn't like to hear you say something like that." The Uchiha gulped down the rest and excused himself to god knows where. Hinata cracked open an eye again, and this time Sasori had magically appeared from the crowd. He didn't say anything, but instead rested his chin upon his hand, setting his elbow on the bar.

"Sasori! Good to see that you're, uh..." Hidan left off awkwardly, and covered his pause with a mouthful of his drink. "Good to see you haven't murdered Deidara yet. I bet he's been a damn pain in the ass, right?"

"Hn." The Suna-nin didn't seem to be particularly talkative.

"Well, it's just 'cause he has that gay-ass long hair. Guys with long hair are always *so* fuckin' conceited and vain and annoying." Hidan continued, unaware that this was rapidly becoming a one-sided conversation. Kakuzu appeared beside him, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Hey, asshole, *what* did you just say about long hair?" he asked sourly.

"Yours ain't that long compared to the fairies over there. Deidara and Itachi got you beat, Kakuzu." Hidan replied with a rue grin. "Though you *are* one vain son of a bitch."

"Compared to who, you? The self-proclaimed messenger of Jashin?"

"Hey! Don't get cocky. Jashin-sama will already rape your soul when you finally go to hell, and convertin' now ain't gonna do nothing. Vanity is a *sin*, you know." he pointed out, ordering another drink. Several other patrons were stopping their conversations to watch and listen in, and the eyes in her direction was making Hinata nervous. She felt sick, and dizzy, and she could feel a headache coming on. She didn't want to be caught up in a brawl if she could barely stand.

"You've just proved my point, idiot." Kakuzu replied smugly, whacking his partner upside the head. "Hey, Itachi! Deidara! Hidan says you're a vain son of a bitch!"

"Hidan can screw himself and go to hell, yeah," was the reply thrown back across the room.

"See? He won't come over here, so he must be so fuckin' self-absorbed it ain't even funny." Hidan said triumphantly, banging his glass on the table.

"...You're just making stuff up now. How drunk are you?"

"Not drunk enough!"

Hinata decided to take her leave of them then, before things got out of hand. Or, at least, she tried to take her leave. The heiress had managed to push herself off of the bar, take two steps, and promptly fell over on top of the nearest unfortunate person. Whoever it was shoved her off, and she fell limply onto the other side. Unfortunately, there was another person to fall onto, and he didn't take kindly to the sudden impromptu attack.

"What the hell?!" Kakuzu shoved her roughly away, into Hidan and almost sending them both onto the floor. "Go act like a whore somewhere else."

"I-I'm no-not—"

"Hey! That ain't no way to talk to a Jashinist, bastard! Apologize this fucking Jashindamn minute!" Hidan shouted drunkenly, narrowing his eyes dangerously. Hinata tried to stagger away, this time for the relative safety of Itachi—who had yet again appeared to order a drink. How the Uchiha could keep it down was beyond her; if she drank another swallow, Hinata was sure she'd throw up.

"Like hell. Hey, wait... she's got just as long of hair as anyone else. Why isn't she vain?" Kakuzu idly picked up a lock of her navy hair, twirling it on his finger. He was right in the fact that it was long; it was nearly to her waist, and she hadn't cut it since she left Konoha. She didn't like to think of herself as vain, however.

"She's not because she's a Jashinist. Anyone who praises Jashin-sama is devoted to him and only him and only serves his bloody, divine will. Jashinists ain't got time for such pettiness as vanity," he replied primly, crossing his arms.

"I-I'm not a-a Ja... Jash... a fo-follower." Hinata slurred, trying to stay upright. So far the feat eluded her. She swayed on the spot, wondering *why* she felt the need to wear high-heeled sandals all the time.

"...What the hell do you mean, you're not?! Bah, godless heathen bitch." Hidan waved her away irritably, scowling. Kakuzu chuckled smugly, ruffling his partner's hair. "Fine then, Kakuzu. *Anyone* with long hair is vain, 'kay? That includes *you*, since your hair is to your fucking shoulders, you gay bastard..."

"My hair isn't any longer than yours, you little shit."

"Uh... I'm n-not vain..." Hinata offered, but neither man noticed her. She tottered off before it got bloody, wondering if she *was* vain. Just because she had long hair?

The alcohol is getting to my head... I'm not vain. But... am I conceited for thinking that I'm not? I like my hair; it's pretty... does that really mean I'm vain? Her mind walked itself in confusing circles. The smell of alcohol in the bar was getting to be too much for her, and she decided to head outside before she got sick. Even the pouring rain would be better than Akatsuki bar fights and drunken men.

Somehow she made it outside, but not without somehow losing one of her sandals. The heiress ditched the other one in a puddle, swishing the cool mud between her toes. Her long hair was soon plastered to her, and Hinata had to occasionally wring it out, lest it became too heavy. "Should I cut my hair?" she asked no one in particular. The grey sky above her gave no answer, except to continue the perpetual rain. "Am I vain?"

Hinata staggered down the muddy street, her feet and pants soon bogged down with mud and

water. She accidentally stepped in a too-deep puddle and got soaked up to her knees in both muck and the rainwater. After pulling herself free, she continued wandering around aimlessly, completely unaware of what she was looking for. She was drunk, she vaguely knew, but she really didn't know how it affected her.

Civilians who were actually out avoided her, and soon she began to notice. Had she been sober, she would have recognized the fact that they were now avoiding anyone associated with the Akatsuki. But, unfortunately, Hinata was not.

"Ar-Are they getting a-away from me-me because I'm *vain*?" she asked cluelessly. She stood still in the rain, just letting it pour down on her, pondering that question. Could people sense vanity? Or did her long hair give her away? "I-I need to ask s-someone..."

Unfortunately, no one came to mind. She couldn't remember where Deidara was, and Kabuto had completely disappeared. Most of her other friends were still in Konohagakure. Except Naruto and Sakura... but Hinata didn't want to talk to them. They were mean, and they would probably hurt her. Sasuke was off somewhere, and Neji was— "Oh! I-I'm supposed to meet up w-with Neji-niisan..."

Something about a seven-day time limit dimly penetrated the haze in her brain. Hinata idly wondered if it had been that long, but then she couldn't remember when she was supposed to have started counting. The heiress realized that she also didn't know where her cousin was, except that he was in a forest somewhere. Cheerfully the drunken Hyuuga skipped and tripped down the dirt road towards the city limits, knowing that there was lots of forest around Amegakure.

No one stopped her, so she assumed it was okay to leave the village. She needed to ask Neji if she was vain, anyway. That was a good enough reason, right?

Unfortunately, Hinata realized that the forest was a pretty big place. Especially when every few steps she'd get stuck in the mud and have to spend ten minutes trying to get out. She had no idea how much time elapsed, but she was starting to get frustrated.

That was when she met the woman.

The woman was standing on a tree branch, looking surprised. She was looking down at Hinata, who had only spotted her by chance. The woman had bright red hair, stained darker by the rain, and thick, black glasses. Her outfit was soaked, but she was wearing some light-colored top and black shorts. Hinata hadn't ever seen her before, but evidently the woman recognized some part of her.

"Are you a ninja?" the drunk one asked, cocking her head.

"Are you drunk?" the mysterious woman replied in kind, frowning. "You're a Hyuuga... are you from the Rain?"

"Yes, it's raining," she answered happily, wiping a lock of hair out of her eyes. "Miss ninja... am I vain?" She seemed like a good candidate for asking.

"If you want to be," she replied elusively, looking around uneasily. Hinata's shoulders drooped, and she slid down to her knees in the mud. The red-haired woman bit her lip; evidently it was the wrong thing to reply with. "Umm... wait right here..."

Then the woman disappeared, and Hinata was alone again with her vanity. She looked down at herself, covered in mud, and felt like crying. Crying or throwing up, it was hard to tell. Instead, she yawned and rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve.

-.-.-

Sasuke was surprised when Karin returned so quickly. "Have you found Itachi?" he asked immediately, standing up.

The tracker smiled sheepishly, looking innocent. "Well, yes... but I found someone else, a bit more interesting. Sasuke-kun, do you know a female Hyuuga?"

This caught him off guard. Suigetsu also perked up with an expectant grin. "Female Hyuuga?"

"Suigetsu, no." Sasuke snapped, sitting back down. This complicated things. Why was Hinata out *here*, of all places? More importantly, where was Neji if she was alone in the woods? "... Yes, I know a female Hyuuga. Why?"

"Sasuke-kun is *so* popular with the ladies," Karin sighed dreamily, hiding her face in her hands. Suigetsu made a similar, mocking gesture, cooing girlishly. The redhead glared at him, sticking her tongue out, all business again. "Well, I found her. Hinata, isn't it? She's alone, soaked, and I think drunk."

"*Drunk?*" both Suigetsu and Sasuke asked in unison. The Kiri-nin snorted, shaking his head. Sasuke, however, was almost dumbfounded. Shy, innocent little Hyuuga girl, *drunk*. Especially this near to Amegakure. Immediately, their shinobi training kicked in, telling them both one word: *trap*.

"...Does this have any relation to the other Hyuuga, Neji, that we met?" Juugo asked flatly, narrowing his eyes a bit. Sasuke hesitated, then finally shook his head.

"Her name is Hinata. She was captured over half a year ago by the Akatsuki. We knew each other in Konohagakure is all," he replied stiffly. Suigetsu elbowed him in the side, but allowed him his lie. "She's the Hyuuga's heir. She's completely harmless, except for her political value. I'm surprised that the Akatsuki haven't tried to bargain with Konoha with her..."

"Well if you want to protect the Leaf, now's your chance." Karin pointed out, placing one hand on her hip. With the other, she pointed towards the avenger quite seriously. "If she's that important to the organization, no doubt she'll be snatched right back up soon."

"Hey, it's your decision, then. Whether or not to save little miss heathen." Suigetsu said slyly.

Sasuke shook his head again, stubbornly. "No. Konohagakure can rot for all I care. Hyuuga Hinata is of no concern to me... but she may know something of Itachi..."

-.-.-

Hinata looked up blearily, dropping the kunai in her hands. Someone was standing over her, but the backlight made it impossible to make out any features in her state. She had just been about to cut her miserable, vain hair, when whoever-this-was stepped up.

She yawned, rubbing her eyes. Alcohol made her sleepy, that much she knew. Something in the back of her mind was telling her that it was a mortal *sin* for ninja to get in this state, but Hinata couldn't quite place *why*.

The figure knelt down to her height, and she felt herself being picked up. Instinctively, she wanted to push away, but the person's body heat was too good to pass up in the frigid rain. Hinata felt her eyelids droop, and finally, she drifted off into a light sleep, just trying to remember how she recognized this person.

-.-.-

Sasori had had enough of this. He wasn't in the best mood. The air stunk of smoke and alcohol. He was feeling an unaccustomed sensation—pain—and it wasn't going over well. Deidara was making an utter fool of himself. He was rapidly approaching a headache, and whatever drinks he had orders, as usual, were next to tasteless. The bandages he was forced to wear were itching, another strange phenomenon with him, and he didn't like it.

So he stood up, politely and sarcastically bowed his leave to Konan and Pein—who were leaning against each other, drunk but at least regal-looking (as always)—and turned to gather up his partner. Deidara was attempting to get up onto the bar for whatever reason. Sasori placed his hand on the blonde's shoulder, but he was shrugged off, quite rudely.

Irrked, Sasori yanked his hands downward with as much force as he could. The chakra strings he had just attached to Deidara's shoulder sent him tumbling down onto the floor, hitting his head with a nasty *crack*. The Suna-nin didn't care much, and instead dragged the younger ninja out of the bar without touching him.

"Wha' are you doin'?" Deidara asked suspiciously, flopping around like a fish out of water. Sasori helped him back up with the strings, rolling his eyes.

"You are making a fool of yourself and the crowd was giving me a headache. And I would just like to inform you of the Hyuuga's absence," he replied curtly, dropping his hold on his partner.

Deidara narrowed his eyes, swaying dangerously on the spot. "You-You're just saying that... I can't leave you, Leader-sama told me not to leave you. You're in my-my charge, and you can't go an' kill yourself again."

Sasori was only mildly outraged by Deidara's words. True, the leader had told him not to let go of Sasori, but the redhead's words were also true. Hinata had not been seen for about an hour now, and while he himself was the farthest thing from worried, he thought it would be considerate of him to inform Deidara of her disappearance.

Of course, it wasn't like he didn't have an ulterior motive.

Yes, he wanted an excuse to get away from Deidara, but not to go attempt suicide once more. He just wanted to... think. A lot had happened, and while he was in no physical danger any more, he was still hurting. His heart had stopped bleeding, at least.

So instead, Sasori remained neutral. "I find it interesting that your usage of 'yeah' is nonexistent right now. Is it a voluntary action to say it, or are you just not saying it because you're drunk?" he asked politely, smiling ruefully.

Deidara frowned, color rising in his cheeks. "I-It's none of your business."

The smile grew into a tight grin. "Have I touched a nerve?"

"It's none of your business..." he repeated stubbornly, looking away. Sasori stayed silent, waiting for an explanation he knew would never come.

After a few moments in the pitter-patter of the rain, Sasori said quietly, "If you still want to know about the Akatsuki, I'll tell you. When you're sober. Come find me when you've slept off your hangover." Deidara nodded.

Then, before Sasori could leave, his partner suddenly pulled him against him. Deidara wrapped his arms tightly around him, resting his chin on top of his head. Needless to say, Sasori was more than slightly surprised. "What—"

"Don't... don't leave me again like that. Promise me, Sasori-danna."

"You're overly emotional because of all you've been drinking," he replied stubbornly, trying to pull away. But the taller shinobi held him tight.

"Promise me," he said quietly. Maybe Deidara wasn't quite as drunk as Sasori had thought.

"I won't leave you. But you'll leave me, so it makes the point moot." Unable to move, Sasori just leaned his forehead against Deidara's shoulder. "Let me go."

"N-Not until you promise me."

"It doesn't even matter. Shouldn't you be finding your Hyuuga partner?"

"I need to make sure my other partner doesn't leave me."

"If I promise, will you let me go?"

"Maybe."

"Then I'm not promising anything."

Deidara didn't reply, so they just stood like that in the rain. Sasori was just starting to worry that his partner would fall asleep standing up when the blonde spoke up again. "Wh-Why did you do it?"

"You wouldn't understand, brat. You're too naïve."

"Y-You said art w-was eternal... so why were y-you going to l-leave me?" Deidara asked, his voice rising a bit. Sasori hoped he wouldn't cry.

"Things change. Art may be eternal, but I was a fool to think that I could become art." Sasori replied quietly, trying to pull away again. The Iwa-nin let him this time, and when he looked down at the shorter one, there wasn't a tear in sight. Sasori cocked his head to the side, frowning. "Why do you *care*...?"

"Because we're partners, yeah."

(ending scene dedicated to bishieluver01)

Next Chapter: Well, looks like Sasori survived after all, and is finally coughing up some of those secrets to his partner! Meanwhile, Hinata gets abducted and contemplates her non-existent 'vanity'...

Experiments Gone Awry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Akatsuki had many secrets, not all of them surrounding the members. Immortality, mind control, scandals, conspiracies... all of it was intertwined with what was supposed to be ten shinobi.

Only three more ninja somehow snuck into the clandestine circle.

A wide-eyed, meek kunoichi whose part was entirely involuntary.

A sly medic-nin who knew more about some of the members than anyone else alive knew.

A devoted, green-eyed assassin who was thrust upon the throne of an entire country due to one man's whim.

There were many relationships and connections between people that the Akatsuki never wished revealed. Everyone had their secrets, but even the mention of the name 'Akatsuki' seemed to multiply those mysteries. Rumors of a god-like entity, hushed tales of a man who you could decapitate and he would still speak, whispers of a man whose eyes could drive lesser ninja to the brink of insanity. Amegakure was held in its grip, unwillingly but never wanting to leave. The civilians knew they were protected by these mysterious figures.

Protected by the secrets the figures never wanted shown to the light.

Secrets that could kill any of the members, even the leader, if used in the wrong way. And while Sasori didn't know all of them, he had been with the group for several years. He knew a fair amount. And he was going to divulge it *all* to Deidara.

-.-.-

Hinata awoke to a massive headache and the annoying awareness of the sound of rain on glass. She tried to get back to sleep, but after finding she couldn't, she just groaned and opened her eyes.

"Nice to see you're awake." She jumped, looking around guiltily for that oh so familiar voice. He was leaning against the wall near the window, where outside the rain was still pouring down. Looking around the room hastily—anything to give herself a few moments to try to come up with some excuse or rationale—Hinata realized that they must have been in a hotel room.

"A-Are we still in Amegakure...?" she asked quietly, propping herself up on her elbows. Neji came over and sat beside her, nodding vaguely. "Won't th-that upset Itachi?"

"Itachi has enough on his hands without bothering with me. Plus... what Itachi doesn't know won't hurt him," he replied with a slight smirk. Hinata sighed, shaking her head with a soft smile.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. He looked haggard, with lines under his eyes and scratches all over himself and his clothes. The scored hitai-ate only made her cousin look more like

the renegade he was. One lock of his dark hair was falling into his face, and Hinata reached over to tuck it behind his ear. "Wait... your hair... is it shorter?"

"So you really were drunk," he murmured, smiling ruefully. Neji ruffled her own hair, jerking his head over towards the bathroom. "Go look in a mirror before you comment on *my* hair."

She blanched, eyes wide. That was *not* one of the things you said to a girl. Hinata dimly remembered something about her hair, but it was in reference to something Hidan had said. *What* had she done...? After a brief moment of staring at him, searching in his eyes for any hint of a joke, the heiress raced to the bathroom for a mirror.

Her hair, which had previously been close to waist-length, was now just above her shoulders. The unfortunate surprise made her jaw drop, as she turned her head from side to side, staring at the haircut. "Wh-When did th-this happen...?!"

"I found you nearly passed out in the forest yesterday afternoon. You were drunk as hell and trying to cut your hair with a kunai. Something about someone saying you were vain... which you most certainly are *not*." Neji said, raising an eyebrow. He stood up, stretching languidly, and walked over to stand behind her. "You need to learn not to take what everyone says to heart so easily."

"B-But I..." Hinata trailed off, unable to tear her eyes away from her hair. She hadn't had hair this short in *years*! "Why is *your* hair shorter, then?"

"In order to pacify you, I was trying to tell you that if you cut your hair, I would cut mine. ... You didn't listen." He let a bit of a smile show along with his words.

"And y-you *listened* to me?! I was *drunk*, for god's sake!" she burst out, whirling around to face him. Neji just raised his eyebrows, giving her a flat look.

"I think it looks cute on you," he said simply, and that was the end of that.

Hinata was now leaning against his shoulder, both of them sitting cross-legged on the bed. She still had a headache, but it wasn't nearly as severe as it had been. Neji seemed quite content to just sit there, near her, and wasn't saying anything. She was curious, not to mention confused, as to how he found her, but didn't know exactly how to ask. If she had been intoxicated enough to not remember a single thing, then she really didn't want to know what else she had done.

"Amegakure has changed," he announced suddenly.

"Oh?"

"Yes. It is now allowing any shinobi who has no further ties to their home village into the city, to 'audition', as it's called. I think the Akatsuki's leader is attempting to raise an army."

"M-Maybe these people are just lonely and want a home," she said softly, closing her eyes. "If there was a village that welcome missing-nin and exiles, I'd imagine it w-would become quite popular..."

"It's possible."

They lapsed into silence once more. Hinata was wondering what a village of complete missing-nin would be like, and whether or not these so-called criminals were really as bad as the other villages made them out to be. Frankly, she liked the idea of a shinobi village with ninja of all different backgrounds. It would be a nice, diverse home.

It would make some sense if that was what Pein was trying to do. He had already gathered the strongest missing-nin from different villages, and called them Akatsuki. Surely he had some plans past the capture of the Bijuu, and even if they were immensely strong, there were only ten members. Plus, no doubt he'd like his own village to govern.

"I think Deidara-kun and I are drifting apart," she found herself telling her protector.

"Really now." He sounded almost amused, irritatingly enough. "I had thought that you two were inseparable by now."

"I-we are. ...I think. It's just... he's spending more and more time with Sasori, and I'm getting a little lonely." Hinata felt strange admitting this, but it was somewhat true. It would only make sense; within the group, she had never been a member. She had lost the role of Deidara's partner when he got into the organization, and she was an outcast once more.

"Then why don't you leave?" Neji asked, as if playing the role of the devil on her shoulder. He put one arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his chest. "You owe nothing to them, especially if Deidara is adapting as well as you say to the organization."

"But... I couldn't do that to him. He's one of my best friends..." she whispered, eyes downcast. "Plus, Kabuto-kun and I almost... need each other. We-We're both outcasts within the group. I-I have friends there, and I couldn't just leave them. Not to mention that it would be high treason..."

"Then I'll stay here."

"But—"

"Listen, Hinata. I'm a jounin, and my Byakugan is the strongest in generations. I can hold my own in a fight. But if you're really worried about me," he paused, no doubt putting that brilliant mind of his to work, "Just... get members on your side. Deidara would side with you in any argument, and it sounds like he could convince Sasori. You said you have 'friends' within the organization—use your friendship to earn sympathy. The leader wouldn't dare divide his organization over some petty jounin, and would no doubt keep everyone busy to distract them. Itachi couldn't come after me without disobeying his superior."

She thought it over, yet again marveling at how quickly he could come up with these plans of his. Still, she hadn't been completely honest with him; involuntary or not, they were both missing-nin. Even if they *could* get back into Konohagakure, like he evidently wanted, she couldn't face Naruto again. She couldn't face him *ever* again. There was more than one reason she wanted to stay safely tucked away in the Land of Rain.

"Y-Yeah. Let's just stay here..." she whispered, smiling sadly to herself. "Neji... I'm glad you're back. J-Just don't do anything stupid while y-you're here."

"I'm in a safer situation than you." The brunette turned and placed his lips against her temple, giving her a small squeeze. "I'll be careful if you be careful. Don't forget, I am still your protector."

"Ah, y-yes. I think I have enough knights that I couldn't get into any trouble, anyway."

"Good. As a princess should."

Deidara was apparently gifted with the great talent of repelling almost any hangover. The next morning when Sasori met with him, he was just as fanatical and flamboyant as ever, if a bit skittish over the fact that the Hyuuga girl really *was* missing. Sasori didn't particularly care; she would reappear in her own good time. And if Deidara was going to react in the way that the puppeteer thought he would, then the Iwa-nin would no doubt tear apart Amegakure in his effort to find her and haul his tail end out of there.

Of course, Sasori had never been one to mince words. Plus he was still irritated with the idiotic bandages he was forced to wear by Konan, even if the pain had stopped. (He'd decided that he *never* wanted his heart pierced again. It hurt like hell.) "Deidara, you aren't of any further use to the organization. Your only real job was to capture your sole Jinchuuriki, and before we have all nine, there's nothing else you can do."

That cut the blonde's attitude down a notch or two. "...What? What're you saying, yeah?"

"Leader-sama wouldn't have batted an eye if I had already caught my own Bijuu. The fact that I hadn't was the only reason he was really upset." Sasori said harshly, crossing his arms. He was sitting in a tree, just outside the city walls, with his legs dangling down above Deidara's head. He resisted the urge to kick him.

Deidara didn't say anything, and instead looked down at his sandals.

"If you're just going to sulk, I'm wasting my time." He made to move, but his younger partner snapped back to attention, a serious look on his face. Sasori smiled humorlessly. "Deidara... didn't you ever stop to think how *easy* it was for you, a non-member, to kill someone of Orochimaru's caliber?"

From the look on his face, Deidara *had* thought about it before, but had never dared to think about it too hard.

"Orochimaru was a deviant to the group's wishes and goals. We needed to get rid of him. You were picked to do that job for us, and to replace him."

"Wait, now I know you're lying, yeah," he said sourly, putting his hands on his hips. "*I* was the one who wanted to join. I've wanted to join for *years* now, yeah, and there was no way that you could have even known about me until I killed Orochimaru. You're just trying to get me all riled up, yeah."

"Your sister... her name was Emiko, wasn't it?" Sasori asked quietly. It was almost comic how Deidara's face slowly drained of color.

"*How—*"

"Like I said, we *picked* you to do this job for us," the redhead said darkly, looking down in disdain at his partner. "You showed proficiency at a young age, and we decided to... use your skills."

The blonde, predictably, didn't say anything.

"It was something new that Leader-sama had wanted tried out. To pick young ninja who showed signs of classic genius and... cultivate them. You and Itachi were only two of them we started."

"Th-Then what about the *other* members...?" he asked hoarsely.

"In the beginning, there was only five of us. Leader-sama, Konan, Zetsu, Kakuzu and myself. Orochimaru was the next to join. He was fleeing Konohagakure, after betraying it with his grotesque experiments. I was partnered with him, because Leader-sama thought it was quite amusing that we were both questing for immortality."

"Questing... yeah? Does that mean that you joined before you... uh..." Deidara trailed off, evidently finding something to sidetrack his mind with. The redhead was a bit amused how desperately he latched onto any topic not directly dealing with himself.

"Yes. I had only just begun to experiment with turning my body into a puppet at that point. I joined the Akatsuki when I was sixteen years old." Sasori said. "Soon afterward, Kakuzu and Orochimaru had their first fight. It wasn't pretty, and it was then that Orochimaru started to deviate from the Akatsuki. When Kisame joined, after a failed military coup, we decided that the current members clashed too much. We needed to start being more choosy about who joined up."

"What about Hidan, yeah? He joined right before I did." Deidara's voice was oddly hollow, yet still held the raw desperation that made panicking ninja so dangerous.

Sasori just smiled thinly. "We have several potential shinobi that could probably join at any time. After Kakuzu killed his partner, we decided to get Hidan, someone Kakuzu *couldn't* kill. He wasn't a planned addition, but so far he's served his purpose."

"But me... and Itachi...?"

"Your mother died some time before we found you, luckily enough. You were an amazing child, really, but you didn't express any interest whatsoever in becoming a ninja. We had to change that. Zetsu killed your sister in that attack on your village. As far as I know, your father had the high honor of being killed by Konan." Sasori stated dispassionately. "That was fuel enough to get you thinking like a ninja."

Deidara looked back down at his feet.

Ruthlessly, the redheaded artist went on. "Konoha ninja took care of your teammates that night, didn't they? If you hadn't gotten away from them, however... you would have faced the Konoha's Yellow Flash, do you know that?" His partner stayed silent, and it looked like he had run out of words. "So, you naïve little child, you returned to Iwagakure just in time for us to finish severing your bonds, readying you for our organization. It was one of *my* spies who betrayed you to the Tsuchikage. I have to admit, though, that no one was expecting you to kill that many people. It was because of that that you were chosen to be the one to take care of Orochimaru for us. And because of that, Itachi was defaulted into the role of Kisame's partner."

"So... the Akatsuki murdered my family and was the reason I was exiled from Iwa?" he asked tonelessly. Deidara looked up at him, his face perfectly blank. "And then I *wanted* to join... yeah...?"

"Yes. That's why no one was very pleased when you still showed loyalty to Iwa, even after your defection. ...Remember that Iwa ANBU at the Rain Lord's palace...? It was designed to test your loyalty. The rest of the ANBU, however, they were a surprise for all of us." Sasori paused for a moment, trying to read his partner's expression. "The Akatsuki isn't quite as glamorous as you had thought, huh...?"

"But... what if I *hadn't* turned out this strong...?" he asked in a strained voice.

"We made sure that you were. Your genin teacher, he was also a subordinate of Zetsu's. We gave

you an edge that no other explosives user in Iwa dared to have."

Deidara impulsively looked down at the mouths on his hands.

"You and Itachi were Pein's pet project. Of course, he never expects either of you to find any of this out, and all of the senior members are sworn to secrecy." Sasori deadpanned.

"Th-Then *why* did you tell me *this*...?"

"Because you deserved to know? Because by saving my life, I want to take all of the comfortable ignorance out of yours? Because the Akatsuki is splitting internally and I want to know what side you are going to join? Take your pick of any of the convenient excuses." Sasori hopped down from the tree branch, masochistically pleased with himself. Deidara hadn't been as blindly loyal to the organization as Itachi was, and hopefully this would be the push needed to get him to finally leave.

"Sasori-danna—" Deidara stopped him from walking away, pulling him back fiercely. "What is the *real* reason you told me all of this?!"

The puppeteer merely stared at him, then brushed his hand off of his shoulder. "...Because Leadersama's dream is a fool's dream. We are either going to end up ruling the world and turn inwardly on each other to rip each other to pieces, or else the Akatsuki members are going to be hunted down, one by one, and slaughtered. You don't deserve that."

Unfortunately, what Sasori *hadn't* counted on was Deidara's personality. The blonde grinned, in a way that could only be described as psychotic, and replied, "I'd rather go down fighting than leave you now, yeah. Six more Bijuu to go, and then we'll see how we fare against the other members in this inner war you see coming."

Sasori scowled and hit his partner upside the head. "Don't play the hero, idiot! You're just going to get yourself killed with your nonsense! You're still young enough *not* to throw your life away—and what about that Hyuuga girl? Do you want her to be caught up in this web?!"

"Bya-chan... already has her knight in shining armor. She's fine, yeah. Besides, either way, it sounds like there's going to be another Great Shinobi War. I missed out on the last one; I want to join in this one, yeah. Especially if I get to help cause it." The Iwa-nin grinned evilly, crossing his arms. Sasori sighed; this was *not* how this meeting was supposed to go.

"You're being noble and stupid. Any loyalty you feel to this organization and country is just a contrived mix of bias and circumstantial relationships."

"Then maybe I'm biased and in a circumstantial relationship, yeah." Deidara chirped, still beaming. "Either way, you aren't going to get rid of me that easily, Sasori-danna."

Sasori just shook his head, sighing once more. He turned and walked away, hearing his idiotic partner following him. He'd tried logic, the truth and even anger. The blonde just was doomed to be stuck in a failing group of damned shinobi.

"Besides, how am I supposed to take my *revenge* if I'm not in the Akatsuki, yeah...?" Deidara whispered in his ear, and Sasori turned in surprise to see Deidara grinning, just as cheerful as ever.

"...Maybe this partnership can work out, after all. Brat." The redhead relaxed into a smirk, tilting his head a bit. "Though you're completely hopeless."

"That's what you think. Maybe *you've* just spilled all of the secrets to me, but *I* still have a few of my own, yeah. Like a giant, clay Deidara that explodes into invisible bombs."

"Now *that* I'd like to see," Sasori rolled his eyes, chuckling slightly. Deidara just smirked a bit, resisting the urge to laugh.

"Even if you've lost faith in your own art, doesn't mean I haven't lost faith in mine, yeah," he just said with an innocent shrug.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara deals with the fact that he is just an experiment turned ninja. Hinata deals with her cousin suddenly becoming a constant figure in Ame, and what dangers that brings with it. Unfortunately, though, it's 'vacation' time! The Leader calls for a team to go to the Land of Lightning for a month-long mission...

Ending Note: DK has officially broken 100 favorites, of which I thank each and every one of you dearly. The thank-you picture should be up some time (on my deviantart for Dark Knight). Expect a scene from the next chapter.

Silent As Snow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rain slowly melted into snow over the course of the next two months in Amegakure. Aside from the minor scandal Sasori had caused with his little stunt, all was quiet. Sasuke and his force had never gotten the chance to stage their invasion of the Rain; Itachi and Kisame had conveniently left on a mission and hadn't returned. Neji had yet to be discovered by anyone aside from Deidara—who introduced him to Sasori in a vain attempt to get the Konoha-nin killed—and the Iwa-nin himself hadn't dared attempt anything else. And after wearing her hair up in a bun for over a week, Hinata had been found to have cut her hair, much to the surprise of many of the members. (Though it was Konan who first found out, after drawing the girl to the side and asking her in no polite terms if she was trying to copy her hairstyle.)

Other than that, the Akatsuki was as quiet as the snow itself.

One more demon had been caught and sealed, bringing their number up to four. They were almost halfway done. Of course, as the fourth caught had been the Sanbi and was captured by Sasori, understandably he and his partner were quite nervous. Both of them had completed their tasks, and unless they could prove their continued loyalty and use, they could be killed.

But when the mission for a month in the far north of the Land of Lightning was volunteered to any pair that wanted to go, Deidara leapt at the opportunity. He seemed quite eager, but when asked about it, he merely replied snappishly, "The land of Lightning is beautiful this time of year, and they have tons of hot springs. Closest thing to a vacation we're ever going to get, yeah."

So within the week, the three ninja were trudging through the snow-covered mountains of the Land of Lightning. Widely circling around Kumogakure, of course; their official business was with some old man who had the great misfortune to owe the Akatsuki quite a sum of money. (Kakuzu and Hidan would have taken the mission, had Hidan not have been assigned to the Nibi Jinchuuriki at that time.)

So here they were, Hinata trying to get herself unstuck from a waist-high snowdrift, and Deidara trying to work out a way to circumvent said drift. Sasori watched them both in mild amusement. After a few moments, however, both of the others found themselves stuck firmly in the snow.

"S-Sasori-danna, he-help, please, yeah!" Deidara begged, his teeth chattering. "Th-This is r-really cold...!"

"I don't think it's cold out," he replied smugly. The blonde shot him a dirty look, rubbing his arms in a vain attempt for warmth.

"D-Do you wa-want us both d-dying out h-here, y-yeah?!"

"...Do you honestly want me to answer that?" After even more glares—this time from the heiress even—Sasori relented. He held out his arm, the metal coil held within his stomach slithering out of his sleeve. "Hold on to it and I'll pull you two out."

Obligingly, the pair did as he said. Smirking slightly, Sasori decided to have his fun before completely freeing them. Once both of them were firmly holding on with mitten-covered hands, the puppeteer flung them both over the side of the hill. With a squawk and a screech, and with their

ninja training turning them so they at least landed on their feet, both Hinata and Deidara quickly found out that there was a frozen river just below them. Sasori slid down the snowy hill just in time to see them both sliding around ungracefully on the ice, falling and trying to get up again.

"Th-That was mean!" she said in a high voice, trying to keep her balance on the slick ice. Unfortunately, Deidara crashed into her, and then both went sliding down the river. Sasori smirked, keeping to the shore as he followed them.

The redhead eventually found them both just laying in the middle of a frozen pond, panting slightly and shivering, but laughing. Sasori calmly strolled over to them, or as far as the bank would allow him to go. There was no way he'd go out on that ice, just to get ambushed by them. "Having fun?"

"It-It was like a giant sl-slide, yeah!" Deidara called cheerfully between laughs. "Oh, I know! We should have a toboggan!"

Hinata sat up, shaking snowflakes out of her shorter hair. She smiled warmly, trying to get up on the ice. "I-I like th-that idea, but what wi-will we use as a sled...?"

"We could c-carve a chunk of ice out of-of the pond, yeah..." Eagerly, Deidara pulled out a kunai and began chipping away at the ice below their feet.

"Do you really think it's best to start stabbing your footing when you don't know how deep that ice is?" Sasori asked critically. Hinata, on cue, looked down at the ice as if it would crack at any minute, trying to make her way back to the shore again.

Deidara stuck his tongue out, and stood back up. "This ice is-isn't thin, danna. See, yeah?" To prove his point, he jumped up and down on the ice, right where he had started to carve out a toboggan.

Unfortunately, Deidara's point was about as weak as the ice. With an angry crack, the surface below him shattered and he was dunked in the freezing water.

After they pulled him out of the water, he was shivering more than ever. Hinata offered up her scarf and earmuffs, but it wouldn't do much compared to a sopping wet cloak and coat. Sasori wasn't wearing anything aside from his uniform to sacrifice, so they were forced to try to find shelter before the blonde froze to death.

"I-I-I h-hate y-you," he spat venomously to Sasori. The redhead shrugged, giving him an *'I told you so'* look.

"Y-You need to shush an-and conserve your energy!" Hinata scolded, wrapping her arms around his torso in a vain attempt to share body heat. "S-Sasori, where is th-the next village...?"

"The next village is Kumogakure." he replied curtly, crossing his arms. "I highly doubt they would welcome us in with open arms."

"I-I d-do-don't c-care, y-yeah." Deidara said immediately, sneezing.

"So you would rather be slaughtered, if you could die warm in their prison?" he asked harshly. "We need to find a cave or some sort of shelter, or if need be, carve one out. Can you still manage a Doton?"

"Y-Yeah, I th-think s-so-so..." he nodded miserably, wrapping his rapidly freezing coat tighter around him. Hinata made a motherly, comforting sound, leaning her cheek on his shoulder.

-.-.-

After a few mishaps and two Doton-made avalanches, the three finally had a nice little hideaway hollowed out of the mountainside. Or more accurately, they had the supremely good stroke of luck to have found a tunnel just a few feet into the rock, and managed to break into said tunnel. As ninja, they were wary of whatever the black passageway could hold, but at the same time, it wasn't like *they* had much to worry about. All-seeing eyes and two Akatsuki members. Not much would sneak past them.

"There's no one here... w-we're alone," she whispered, leading the way. One hand was on the nearest wall, and even with her Byakugan, she couldn't see in pitch black. Like the other two, she was feeling her way along. "Oh—the wall curves a bit here..."

"Deeper into the mountain..." Sasori mused aloud, behind them both.

Deidara took one hand off of where he was clinging to the icy coat, placing it on the stone. Raised to be Akatsuki or not, he was still a natural Iwa-nin. "It-It is a-a m-ma-maze, y-yeah... St-Stone tunnels-s, I-like escape ro-routes..."

"Probably placed here by Kumo-nin long ago." Deidara stiffened slightly when he felt someone's hand on his shoulder, but it was only Sasori. The redhead steered him forward firmly, obviously having noticed his shivering. "They should be deserted this time of year."

"Sh-Should be..."

"Well, I-I'll find anyone before they can find us," the kunoichi said, almost stubbornly. "So there's no ne-need to worry."

"Oh, *I* feel safe now." Sasori hissed sarcastically. Deidara elbowed him in the side with a snort.

"Th-Then *you* lead us, Sasori." When he didn't reply, she just sighed primly and kept walking. After a few minutes, though, she said quietly, "Is it... getting *warmer*...?"

"I-I can't t-te-tell, yeah," the blonde said with a sneeze. His skin was completely numb, and there was no way he would be able to tell a different in temperature unless he was suddenly thrown into Suna.

"Neither can I," the Suna artist added tensely.

"R-Right, sorry," she whispered apologetically. "I think it's getting warmer, th-though..."

"That's impossible. We're not heading *down*, we're heading *in*. It should be getting colder, if anything." Sasori recited snappishly, though an edge was beginning to force itself into his voice. They were completely relying on the Hyuuga girl with her blind eyes, and she was saying that unused stone tunnels in below freezing temperatures were *warm*.

She didn't have the opportunity to answer, however. With a shriek and a *splash*, they suddenly noticed that she was no longer with them. Before Deidara could shout more than "Bya-chan!", Sasori had evidently correctly surmised the situation and pushed his partner into the water below.

The Land of Lightning was well known for two things: its mountain ranges, and its abundant

natural hot springs. It was common knowledge, but being forcefully pushed into nearly boiling water from near-hypothermia was quite the temperature shock. Deidara kicked his way up to the surface, coughing and spluttering, hearing more than seeing the girl beside him doing the same.

"Wh-What the hell was th-that for, yeah?!" he demanded sourly, in the general direction he thought Sasori was.

"You were nearing a dangerously low temperature. You needed to be heated up before you got frostbite, and the Hyuuga girl was kind enough to find us one of the springs. Now the only problem will be drying out your clothes, hmm..."

"Why did you think about that *before* shoving us in?" Deidara demanded, trying to feel around for the nearest wall. He wasn't feeling cold anymore, at least.

"N-Now the air temperature will shock our systems e-even *further*, you know," the girl beside him added, almost scornfully.

"Not if you both stay in there." Sasori said simply. With a rustle of fabric, the cavern was suddenly illuminated by a small flame dancing on the puppeteer's palm. He glanced around for a few moments, before focusing on the pair in the water. "I can be done with this mission in—"

"*No!*" Both of them chorused, splashing him. Deidara continued, "No way you're going out there alone, yeah."

"I don't feel the cold, nor will I get lightheaded from the altitude. I could no doubt find the target's location far faster by myself." he stated critically, moving the flame up high as he tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. "...Plus you'll both be perfectly safe in here, if that's what you're worried about."

"Hey!" the blonde squawked indignantly. "*You're* the one who said that I was *raised* for Akatsuki missions. Well you can't just cut me out of them like this, yeah! ...And what happens if you get captured or something and we're left in here?"

"I'm glad to see you have so much faith in me, Deidara," he said flatly, cocking his head to the side. He sat down by the water's edge, holding the flame out as a light for the other two to see by. Deidara pouted; he'd been hoping to get some kind of reaction for his first part of the outburst. Evidently not.

"Wh-Why doesn't Sasori just go out and u-um... find a cottage or an inn where we could r-rest? There should be plenty taking advantage of the hot springs..." the meek chuunin volunteered, leaning on the edge of the water. "We could stay there; they sh-should have a fireplace to dry our clothes and warm ourselves *without dunking us in water.*"

The redhead just smiled innocently at the accusation. Deidara, however, eagerly nodded. "Y-Yeah, what she said! Go out and find us an inn, or-or an abandoned house with a fireplace." As Sasori rose again, Deidara added hastily, "And-and just keep in mind that we can't tread water forever, yeah, and if we get out we'll freeze. *Thanks* for that, danna."

"...I'll keep that in mind. Just don't drown while waiting," he said slyly, disappearing with a swirl of his cloak.

Deidara sneezed, sinking low in the water sullenly. "He's not going to come back, is he, yeah?"

"I-I don't think so..." she replied softly.

-.-.-

Luckily for the two stranded in the water, Sasori did indeed come back. He didn't give any reasons as to *why*, but Hinata wasn't going to question the miracle. She hadn't looked forward to treading water for the next few days. He told them both of a small, abandoned cottage he found just north of their position. Plus, it was in the vague area of their target, so it would make a good temporary headquarters while they searched.

Unfortunately, they still had to figure out a way to race the dropping temperature. Hinata and Deidara were both quite saturated, and while it was warm water, that would only give them seconds ahead of the deathly chill. If their clothes froze on them, they wouldn't last long.

"Can't you just make a bird and fly? It'll be much faster, at least." Sasori asked irritably, pacing above them on the solid ground.

Deidara shook his head stubbornly. "I *told* you before. Clay is already heavier than air, and the air up in the mountains is thin enough that we wouldn't last very long airborne. Plus we would freeze faster the higher up, yeah. ...And it's not like my art is just some handy transportation method you can call on whenever..."

"But traveling on the ground, the first time one of you gets stuck in a snowdrift again, you're toast." Sasori pointed out realistically.

"We could just use chakra to keep ourselves on top of the snow," she suggested.

"That would only freeze you faster. Is it worth the risk?" She and Deidara looked at each other, then nodded. Sasori obviously didn't approve of this plan. "...Fine. It'll be on your heads."

Even more luckily for the pair, the cottage wasn't as far as the Suna-nin had stressed. He was probably just worrying, anyway. Nonetheless, both missing-nin were shivering and peeling off their half-frozen jackets off by the time they got through the door. There was a fire going, and with no small amount of thanking and worshipping, they got as near as they dared to the flames.

"I feel like a mother," Sasori said flatly, taking care of the ice-covered clothes. "You're going to catch colds as it is. I'm going to need what else you're wearing, too, unless you want to wander around in the snow in the same predicament as before."

Hinata looked down at herself, blushing. She had already dared to strip farther than she would have under normal circumstances, but really. Sasori was just *impossible* sometimes.

The Suna-nin knelt down beside them, resting his elbows on each of their shoulders. "You know, there *are* extra rooms in this old thing. I'd imagine that you'd find some suitable clothes. Or, if all else fails, some sheets or blankets."

"You need to grow a conscience, Sasori. You think too much like a ninja." Hinata stated primly, standing up. With a red face, she padded down the hall, turning into the nearest room. It was empty except for the dust. Not even furniture or a closet. Tracking the dust back out into the hallway, she found a shut door, and opened it. Peeking inside, she found it to be in mostly the same state as the first room, save for a bed and another door across the room.

She tiptoed across the undisturbed dust, wondering vaguely when the last time someone had lived

in this house was. And what became of them. Opening the door, Hinata heard a noise behind her. With a squeak, she whirled around—but there was no one there.

Chuckling in embarrassment, she thought, *Oh, wow. Look at me. I just start thinking about these things and already I think the house is haunted. Silly me, I need to keep my mind focused... like Sasori's...*

Looking into the open door, she was delighted to find a closet, filled with clothes. True, they were all formalwear, and not nearly as luxuriant as the Akatsuki's store, but she was grateful for anything right about then.

Hinata returned to the living room with her arms full of kimonos, all thoughts of paranoia forgotten. Unbeknownst to the Hyuuga, however, a pair of eyes followed her out of the room.

"Look! Clothes!" she chirped, dropping the pile in front of Deidara.

"Simple minds, simple pleasures?" Sasori asked, watching as his partner eagerly dug around. He got an obi to the head for his troubles.

An hour later, the three ninja were quite comfortably settled into the house. The fire had warmed the living room, but since the heat had yet to spread to any of the other rooms, they just decided to camp out there for the night.

"I feel like a princess," Hinata said warmly, twirling in her new (albeit borrowed) kimono.

Deidara lifted the sleeves of his black one, frowning. "I don't feel like a dragon, yeah. I feel more like a princess, too."

"Right, this isn't your first time cross-dressing... is the mindset starting to grow on you?" Sasori questioned, looking up from his book.

"What's with your crappy mood, yeah?" the blonde replied with his own question, narrowing his eyes. "Bya-chan's right, you're too much of a shinobi. Grow a heart, yeah."

"I can't, I'm afraid. Puppet, remember?" he said with a forced smile.

"Whatever." Deidara dismissed him with a wave, just as Hinata was wondering whether or not to intercede. The artists' bickering had been increasing lately, and they were starting over the most trivial of things...

Instead, she decided to take a proactive, instead of reactive, approach. If they had something to work out, then they needed to work it out. And especially if it was going to interfere with the mission. They were walking the kunai's edge already with the leader, and their fighting didn't need to worsen their chances. "I-I'm going to go try to find some food. You two, uh, st-stay here and... talk. Be nice, now." It was the best lie she could come up with, but it left them both speechless long enough for her to make a quick getaway into another part of the house.

It wasn't like she was going to *eavesdrop*... just explore the house a bit. It wasn't as small as they'd thought at first, with several more rooms beyond the hall she had used. It wouldn't be her fault if she was as far as she could get away from them and she could still hear, right?

Much to her surprise, however, Hinata found that just a few rooms down, the empty rooms completely extinguished any sounds of the conversation. There was more than enough light, with the moonlight reflected off of the snow outside and shining in through the windows, but it gave the emptiness an eerie quality.

There was a soft, continuous, almost *hiss* -like sound. It seemed to be following her, but Hinata paid it no heed. It was only after she realized that the sound wasn't stopping that it began to alarm her.

The chuunin hastily ducked into the nearest room, pressing herself against the wall. Her heart was pounding for no reason, but the sound stopped. Now it was completely silent. As quietly as possible, she tiptoed back out into the corridor, surprised—and a little frightened—when the sound started up again.

But after glancing down at her feet, Hinata realized with a surge of relief that it was just the bottom hem of the oversized kimono dragging on the floor. "Hah... silly me..." she breathed, laughing at herself. She turned around, deciding to head back—she could just wait out their heart-to-heart in one of the closer rooms. Not to mention the fact that she was a *little* bit curious as to why they were clashing so terribly these days. But just a little curious.

Hinata sat down, her back against the wall, and listened to the soft murmur of their voices as she drifted off to sleep, safely within reach of her dragons.

-.:-

"Your pet is acting strangely." Sasori remarked immediately after she left.

"She is *not* a pet!" Deidara snarled hotly. "You really have been an ass lately, you know that, yeah? No wonder she ran off!"

"I'm sorry," he said, though his tone conveyed quite the opposite. "I wasn't aware that I should revere her just because she was the Hyuuga heir, or a kunoichi. I thought she wanted respect because of who she was, but if you think I should—"

"Oh, shut up. You're just twisting my words around, yeah." The blonde crossed his arms stubbornly, sulkily glaring into the fire. Sasori just 'hmm'ed, idly turning a page in his book. Deidara eyed him, then asked, "What are you reading...?"

"Just the ANBU logs for Kumogakure. It's amazing what you can find these days in an abandoned place like this..." he replied calmly, scanning over the page. "But before you ask, yes, it's outdated. Approximately twenty years old, but it's interesting to see who they had as ANBU during the war... It's amazing to see how many names I recognize..."

"But... you're a Suna-nin. You lived across the world from the Land of Lightning, yeah..." Deidara said quietly, cocking his head to the side. If the book was going to be their olive branch, then so be it. He was willing to take the Hyuuga's advice and sort this out, as long as Sasori was willing to cooperate.

"But you know Kisame. He's a Kiri-nin, and the Land of Water is just as far from Iwa."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I didn't know him until I fought him, yeah."

"And that's how I met Kumo-nin." Sasori smiled slightly, looking up over the cover of his book. "War brings people together, whether we like it or not."

Deidara stretched his arms, stifling a yawn. (Regardless, it wasn't very neatly stifled.) "...Do you

really think we're going to start another Great Shinobi War, yeah? We didn't do too good at making friends with Suna..."

"Oh, most certainly. The second we launch a full-scale attack on the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki, war will erupt. Konohagakure has been pissing other villages off for far too long, and hidden alliances and treaties will shine as countries race to wipe others out. It's really quite marvelous sometimes how the most minor of conflicts, such as an assassination, can trigger a world war." The blonde raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued at Sasori's sudden love of warfare. He found himself smiling, wondering what else the Suna artist had up his sleeve.

"Hmm, sounds fun, yeah." He commented casually.

Surprisingly, however, the remark earned him a nasty glare. "You were just a kid at the end of the last war. Even so, you almost had to go up against the Yellow Flash, and you were lucky to have survived the war at all. Don't act so cocky."

Deidara just grinned, albeit a bit wickedly. "Enemies all around, huh? Well, the Akatsuki is like that, and a war will just be an honest attack on us. I figure it'll be more fun to have it out in the open, yeah. Plus there are a few shinobi in Iwa and Konoha that I'd like to pay back..."

Sasori rolled his eyes, but dropped the glare. "Typical. So ready to become a war hero, but you have no idea the risks and horrors involved."

"So *that's* why you want me out of the Akatsuki, yeah?" he asked casually, smirking. The puppeteer caught him, however, and just narrowed his eyes. Deidara innocently widened his own, putting up his hands in a mock surrender. "Hey, I was just asking a question, Sasori-danna. You seem so worried about my welfare, and I was wondering if you are going to turn into a mother hen again, yeah."

Sasori gave him a glare that could peel paint. Deidara stood up, dusting off the back of his kimono, and sat on the arm of the chair that his partner had commandeered for the night. He leaned over, purposely in the way of the book, pretending to read it. "...What are you doing?"

"Reading. And if you're going to act like a mother hen, you need practice with children, yeah."

"Deidara, I am *trying* to read. Move." Deidara just moved so that while he was practically draped over the armchair—and Sasori's lap—he was obstructing even more of the book. "Move it, brat!" Sasori barked, and obediently the junior member teleported back to his spot on the faded rug.

"Are you always this pissy, or do I just get special rights, yeah?" he asked sarcastically, yawning.

"I can assure you, you are the most infuriating artist I have ever met." Sasori deadpanned, returning to his book. "Shouldn't you be getting your Hyuuga friend...? We have nothing more to discuss. It was a waste of time as it was."

"Mm, Bya-chan will come back when she wants... Sasori-danna, am I really that annoying, yeah?"

"Now that I know that your usage of the word 'yeah' is a conscious effort, yes, you are."

"So looks like you didn't take *that* into account when you were raising me to be a good little killing machine, yeah." Deidara said smugly, biting back another yawn.

"You're tired, so go to bed. I'll keep watch." Sasori didn't look up from his book, not falling for the bait. The blonde frowned at his failed attempted, but shrugged it off.

"You need sleep too, yeah. I'll go first watch so that way I can sleep the rest of the night." he volunteered.

Sasori just rolled his eyes, giving up on reading as he shut the book. "Deidara, I don't *need* to sleep. You wasting hours of the night would be... just that. A waste. Fetch Hinata and go to sleep."

"Don't you *like* sleeping, though, yeah?" He persisted even as he stood up, adjusting the kimono. "It's like a slumber party. Humor me, danna."

"I've humored you enough already. Now shut the hell up." And that was the end of that.

Presently, Deidara decided to do as his partner said and find the girl. Either she had been kidnapped (again) or she had fallen asleep somewhere, otherwise she would have returned awhile ago. The blonde was surprised—and a little amused—to find her propped up against the wall just out in the hallway, sleeping soundly with her head resting against her shoulder.

As carefully as he could, Deidara knelt down and picked the sleeping kunoichi up. She stirred a little, mumbling something, but then just sighed and drifted back to sleep. Smiling, he carried her back out into the warmth, laying her down on the pile of blankets that was their makeshift bed. "... Mm?" She rolled over, sitting up sleepily.

He felt a little guilty waking her, but just whispered, "Shh, yeah. Go back to sleep."

"No... Are you two done talking?" She sat up a little straighter, rubbing her eyes.

"Yes." Sasori replied for Deidara, flipping the page of his book lazily. "We are quite finished, Hinata-hime."

The other two blinked, the princess in question blushing a little. "Eh? Princess...?"

"If you two are so set on that fairytale of yours, it will only make sense that I refer to you both as such. Plus, maybe you deserve a little more appreciation than I've been giving you." he stated simply, his eyes darting to Deidara for the briefest moment. The blonde just smiled warmly back at him.

"Y-You don't have to call me that..."

"No, he's just being sarcastic," Deidara chirped, keeping the smile plastered on his face. Sasori didn't deny the accusation. "I bet he doesn't have any idea what we're talking about, yeah. He's just jealous."

"I'm not going to be baited by a brat half my age. I'll be outside, keeping watch. Get some sleep. We'll need to get up early in the morning to search for the target." Sasori said properly, standing up and putting his book to the side.

Deidara stuck his tongue out at his back as he left, muttering, "Grouchy son of a..."

"Y-You two aren't mad at each other, are you? This is just normal, right?" she asked immediately, her white eyes wide with worry.

"Huh?" The question caught him off guard. After all, was he mad at his partner? Not really; this was how they normally acted. Wasn't it...? "No, we're fine, yeah."

She looked down at the blankets on her lap, pressing her fingers together nervously. "You two shouldn't fight. I-I think... I think Sasori-san would be happier if you didn't pick on him all the

time. He's a bit worried that you'll leave him because he's a... puppet..." She whispered the last word as if she were afraid that it was going to offend someone.

"Itachi isn't going to be happy if he sees that you picked up that habit again, yeah." Deidara said, pulling her hands away from the other. He ignored her comments about Sasori, instead offering, "You know, though, danna has a point... that fairytale hasn't been updated in awhile, has it, yeah?"

Smiling sadly, the dark-haired girl shook her head. "No..."

"Then let's bring it up to date, yeah, Bya-chan?" Her smile grew a bit brighter, and she nodded enthusiastically. "Right then...so once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess named Bya-chan..."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Their mission begins when the actual search for the target does. If only Deidara and Sasori could stop fighting for that long...The constant bickering is fraying Hinata. Worse, they can't even cooperate long enough when they do find the target!

Snow Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Wake up. Get up, Hinata-hime."

"Are you always going to call me that...?" She asked in reply, sitting up. Hinata yawned and stretched, before promptly laying back down. Evidently, however, her pillow had been Deidara's stomach, and he jerked away with an 'oof' at the sudden weight.

While she was apologizing fervently and a sleepy Iwa-nin was complaining of a stomachache, Sasori sighed and muttered, "This is precisely why I was trying to wake *you* up first..."

After they had gotten things situated and changed back into their normal mission clothes—though she had to admit that she had liked that kimono—the trio decided to head out into the snowy landscape once more, in search of their target.

Unfortunately, nature stood in their way.

Sasori opened the front door to get a blast of snow to the face. The blizzard turned everything outside stark white. They couldn't even see the trees that had been lining the mountain. And after a failed attempt at tunneling under the snow, Hinata forced the men to do the one thing they dreaded: use the map.

"If we had just used this in the first place, we wouldn't have had to go out and fight frostbite," she said impatiently, tapping her foot.

Unfortunately, this seemed to be one of the few things that Deidara and Sasori were united in. "Get off my back. Have *you* ever tried to read one of Leader-sama's maps?!" The redhead irritably unrolled the paper, looking at the mass of scribbles with a disgusted expression.

She looked over his shoulder, trying to confiscate the map to examine on her own. Deidara, however, beat her to it. "Whoa, *this* is a map? *This* is what we've been following, yeah?" He turned it to either side, trying to figure out which direction was supposed to be north.

Hinata irritably snatched it from him, glaring at them both. Sasori, on the other hand, shook his head. "No, this is the first time I've opened that thing. I've been to this man's house before, back when Orochimaru was still around. I've been going on that for directions."

"You guys, this map may be simplistic—" she received blank looks "—but it *can* be read. See, we passed through the mountain range here, and we're probably around in this area..." But the more she looked at it, the more Hinata doubted her own map reading abilities.

While she puzzled at it, the Suna-nin sighed and put his face in his hands. "Usually Konan creates the maps; I have no idea why she didn't this time..."

"Divine retribution, probably, yeah." Deidara agreed sadly. "Any luck with the map, Bya-chan...?"

"If I knew *where* the target's house was, it might help..." she muttered.

"I believe it's the grey circle." Sasori clarified with a snort. "That is usually what Leader-sama uses..."

"O-Oh... then... we should be really close to it... Within a kilometer or so, I'd say." She drew a small circle on the map with her finger, tapping it near the grey ring. "Should we wait out the snowstorm or try to find it now...?"

"A kilometer isn't far, yeah..." Deidara murmured, tapping his chin.

-.-.-

Of course, a kilometer didn't sound far in a warm room looking at a piece of paper barely drawn to scale.

In a blizzard going against the wind, it was a very different story.

Still, they were shinobi, and acted as such. Even nearly two hours later, when the surrounding area had been thoroughly searched, they regrouped at the cottage, shivering and shaking. No sign of the target's house had been found.

Sasori, brushing snow out of his hair, kicked off his sandals and perched in his chair again. "I don't get it. His house should have been right about here..."

With a sneeze, Deidara added, "W-Well, ma-maybe he m-moved, yeah?"

"No, Yutaka was always too paranoid to move. His place was fortified with his own chakra connections; he could feel people coming a kilometer away," he mused, glancing around uneasily.

"It's just money... c-couldn't we have just gotten K-Kakuzu to get it?" Hinata asked, almost hopefully.

Sasori snorted. "It's not just money. We also have to kill this man, and he's probably suspecting that."

"Why kill him, yeah?" Deidara asked as he warmed his hands by the fire. He looked over his shoulder at his partner curiously. "Like Bya-chan said, money is money. And if he's an old man, he'll die soon, anyway, yeah..."

"Hmm... let's just say that Orochimaru needed a new body the last time I saw Yutaka." Sasori replied dangerously. "The man is a threat to the Akatsuki, especially now that we have a foothold in the world. He has enough power in the Kumogakure government to formally declare war on Ame."

"Ouch." Deidara remarked with a sympathetic wince. "I get your point, yeah..."

"Now if we could just find his house..."

"W-Well... what if *this* is his house?" Hinata asked suddenly, looking around at the rather small room. "Have you ever visited his home?"

"No," he admitted, looking around with a new perspective, "We fought from afar. But if this is Yutaka's place, where is *he*?" The Hyuuga activated her bloodline limit, taking a few moments to look through the house. She shook her head. "This place was covered in dust. If this is his, he hasn't been here for a long time."

"Or someone already beat us to him, yeah?" Deidara asked optimistically. "And if they hid the body in the snow, no one would have found it..."

"It sometimes thaws up north in hot summers. The body would have been discovered then." Sasori put his head in his hands, shaking his head a bit. "It was years and years ago since I last saw him... if he was killed, I'm sure the body is long gone."

"So is the money, then," Hinata added timidly.

"Leader-sama won't like this... yeah..." Deidara said with a chuckle, turning his gaze back to the fire. "How are we supposed to get the money?"

"We could pillage the house and see if he had any hidden anywhere. If all else fails, we could sell some of those kimonos; they have real gold embroidered in them. Or we could use them to bribe Konan, maybe she'd let us off the hook..."

They stayed in the house the rest of the day, moping and sulking. None of them really wanted to admit that the mission had been a failure from the start, and being cooped up in the cottage didn't help matters. If anything, it gave all three a good dose of hay fever.

Sasori and Deidara had fought no less than a dozen times, the last of the bickering having actually involved the Suna-nin throwing his partner out into the blizzard and locking the door afterward. That put Deidara into an especially foul mood, and after trying to assassinate Sasori, he turned his anger on anything that irked him. The redheaded puppeteer almost found it amusing when he and Hinata fought, though; they appeared to pull out verbal weapons against each other that he never would have thought of using.

"I think," he announced, breaking up yet another squabble as he closed his book (an interesting log concerning the ANBU captain of Kumo seventeen years ago), "That it's time for all the little princesses and dragons to go to sleep."

"You know nothing about our fairytale, yeah." Deidara snarled. "Don't act as if you know what we've been through, Sasori-danna."

"My, you must not be too incredibly mad at me if you still call me 'master'," he pointed out with a lazy grin. "If you two are so fed up with this mission—"

"Oh, like *you* aren't angry because of this stupid mission!" Deidara said sarcastically with a roll of his eyes.

"Maybe if you would stop arguing with each other we could get something accomplished!" Hinata cried shrilly. Crossing her arms, she turned on her heel and stalked to the other end of the room, sitting down with her back to both of them.

Sasori rubbed his temples, wondering *why* he had to have a *younger* partner. "You are both acting like immature children. Now, if you would *please* not interrupt, brat, I would like to inform you that I can find out if Yutaka is alive or dead."

Both of them turned to look at him suspiciously.

"I have a spy in Kumogakure's ranks, and he can easily check the death records for the last decade or so. Once we know whether or not the target is dead, then we can proceed accordingly."

"...And *why* didn't you tell us that before?" Hinata asked, almost looking scandalized.

"Because one, it was quite fun to watch you two argue. And two, it had slipped my mind. Now, why exactly did you call him a 'murderous liar'? Who else has the noble little brat killed?" That effectively stopped any more questions in his direction, as well as shut the pair up. Hinata, red-faced, got up and decided to sleep in another room, confiscating most of the blankets in proposed protection against frostbite.

After a brief internal struggle, Deidara decided to follow her. "G'night, danna..." he muttered as he passed him, taking the rest of the blankets and following her.

Sasori just smiled to himself, opening his book back up. Deidara chose Hinata over him, though not after some debating. It was a good sign; they were beginning to grow on each other.

-.-.-

Hinata was only mildly surprised to find Deidara at the doorway. She smiled at him, and returned to making up her nest of blankets. "You didn't have to follow me." The way she said it, however, stated that she was grateful that he did.

He just grinned. "Someone has to keep an eye on you, yeah." Deidara sat down beside her, looking amused at the mess of blankets and pillows around them. Without any further words, he started building up one of the walls of their makeshift nest, and Hinata turned to add to her side.

The pair continued on, eventually demolishing that style and opting for a different one, repeating the process, and so on until it was nearly pitch black in the room and in the little light they did have, they could see their breaths. They stared at each other, as if the darkness had snuck up on them suddenly.

"Maybe we should just get to sleep."

Hinata laid her head on Deidara's shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist. She heard him mumble something else, but soon enough, they were both asleep, safe and somewhat warm in their cocoon.

Several hours later, however, Hinata awoke. She had no idea what woke her up, either. Outside, the moon had risen, and was glittering on the snow outside, lighting the room eerily. She looked around sleepily for the source of her sudden urge to be conscious once more, though she certainly wasn't expecting what she found.

She had been expecting Sasori to be checking in on them (or doing something evil to Deidara, whichever), or possibly a rat or mouse.

Hinata hadn't been expecting a man standing by the door, looking surprised.

"Who are you...?" she asked, bemused. The shock of it was steadily waking her up, and her ninja's sense was beginning to itch at the back of her mind, demanding action.

The man was old, though, and he looked tired. He didn't seem to pose much of a threat, with his overly long kimono that he'd probably trip in if he moved, wispy white hair and small, sad-looking eyes. The moonlight reflected on the snow cast him in an ethereal white light, washing out all of the color from him; he was completely monochromatically white.

"I think I should be asking that of *you*, miss," he wheezed, pointing a rather large, white hand at her. Those were not the hands of an old civilian; those were the hands of an old ninja. "*You're* the one in *my* house at midnight, miss."

She blinked. "A-Am I? I-I'm so sorry, it's just that there was th-this terrible storm today, and we couldn't find anywhere else to sleep—"

"The weather this time of year is always terrible; you should have known that before coming all the way up here, miss," the old man snapped irritably, peering down at her curiously. "Who is that other young lady there with you?"

Hinata looked down at Deidara, suddenly wishing he'd wake up. No doubt he'd know what to do about this rather sudden, weird arrival. (And where was Sasori when she actually needed him?) "A friend."

"Well I want you two out of this house. It's *my* house, and it's not a hotel. You can go to Kumo if you need a place to stay." The man raised his voice a bit, stomping his foot on the floor. At the sudden noise, Deidara stirred sleepily. She took the cue to shake him a little, relieved when he finally sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Wha... who're you?" he asked with a barely concealed yawn.

The white man looked surprised, if a bit disgusted, to find out Deidara's real gender. "You two go have your fun in some other house. I don't want you in my house any longer, so get out!"

Hinata frowned, subtly turning on her Byakugan to check if this man was a threat. His chakra was barely there. It was at a genin's level, if anything. Which either meant that in his old age his system had been declining, or that he used primarily taijutsu. Either way, he definitely didn't seem very intimidating. He was just a faint wisp of chakra; even as a chuunin, she could take him easily.

"Sir, we'll be leaving in the morning. We're just passing through... looking for a man named Yutaka that lives somewhere around here. Have you heard of him?" she asked suddenly; whether or not the elderly man was a threat, he could still be of some use.

"My name's Yutaka, and I'll thank you both to get out of my house *now*." Deidara was awake enough to process that last part, and in a flash he and Hinata were both up.

"You owe us some money, Yutaka, yeah," the blonde said with a grin, all traces of sleep gone from his face. The fact that he still had a bed-head probably ruined whatever intimidation he had, however.

"Eh? A couple of little punks like *you* are Akatsuki?" their target asked, raising his eyebrow. He laughed raucously. "Either I don't get a lot of respect outside of Kumo, or the Akatsuki just likes sending young brats after me."

Deidara just narrowed his eyes, snorting. The Iwa-nin darted forward, sliding down to kick up toward Yutaka's chin-but his foot slid cleanly through the man's head.

Hinata suddenly realized that the moonlight didn't leech the color out of *everything*, just the man; and the fact that he was pure white suddenly made her go pale as well. The faintness of his chakra also made a little bit of sense as well.

Deidara, having regained his footing, was now waving his hand through Yutaka's chest, his eyes impossibly wide and his face almost as white as the snow outside. "Y-You... why can't I touch you, yeah...?"

"Are you on something, kid? You're acting like you just saw a—" Unfortunately, before the man could complete his sentence, Hinata and Deidara started screaming at the top of their lungs. Hinata reactively shut off her bloodline limit, having ran out in the hallway and was trying to find Sasori, ready to beg the stoic redhead to tell her that she was having a nightmare. (She had had some bad experiences with ghosts as a genin, but she could only hope that this was a nightmare.)

Behind her, there was a loud explosion, and the force of it sent her onto her stomach, covering her head with her hands. She heard a door slam, and then Sasori demand, "*What the hell are you two doing?!*" She was pulled up roughly by the arm, suddenly looking into the angry brown eyes of the Akatsuki member.

"Th-There w-wa-was a-a—"

"What? A mouse? Oh for gods' sakes if you say that there was a mouse—"

"A-A gh-ghost!" Hinata cried desperately.

Sasori looked at her for the longest time, trying to gauge whether or not she was lying. She stared fearfully back, the explosion still ringing in her ears and the fact that Deidara hadn't come out of the room painfully obvious. Finally, the redhead dropped her, hanging his head and muttering, "I'm getting too old for this..."

"B-But there really was a ghost! An-And it was Yutaka!" she said defensively, jumping to her feet. Sasori brushed past her, turning towards the room she and Deidara had just been in. Hinata cautiously peeked in over his shoulder.

Deidara was there, looking singed, but otherwise unharmed.

And he was completely alone.

"There was a ghost, yeah," he said by way of explanation, pointing to where the white man had stood. When he saw Sasori's expression, however, he hastily beamed at him in the most innocent way possible. "Aww, did danna come in here to check on me, yeah?"

"When I hear a bomb go off while I am still in the immediate vicinity it sort of concerns me." Sasori took a deep breath, and continued, "And if you two *honestly* believe that there was a *ghost* in here, I swear I'm going to convert to Jashinism just so I can sacrifice you two."

"But there was a ghost in here!" the pair in danger cried in unison. Deidara added, "It was Yutaka, too, yeah!"

"Deidara, get back to sleep. You too, princess. We don't know if Yutaka is alive or dead, and your imaginations probably got carried away with you. That or Hinata-hime's infamous nightmares have returned." Hinata colored at the accusation, ducking her head. "Get back to sleep, now." The authority in his voice didn't leave room for questions, and she hastily jumped back into the mussed nest.

"Since we're on speaking terms again, danna, can you tuck us in?" Deidara asked with a snicker.

"I'm going to kill you one day. I really am."

-.-.-

The next morning, Deidara flopped out of bed, just to be told, "You look like hell," by his partner. It wasn't the best way to wake up.

While he was trying to brush his hair into some semblance of normalcy, Sasori was lacing up his boots. "Where're you goin', yeah?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. He put the brush in his mouth, reaching back to tie his hair up.

"Kumogakure. I told you yesterday that I had a spy there, brat. I'd like to see whether or not the target is alive before you start spouting your ghost nonsense again." He finished tying his boots, and then pulled a scroll out of his sleeve. He opened the door, letting a cold blast of air in, and left. Deidara only stared after him for a moment before hastily following him, though half-dressed and barefoot.

"What? What d'you mean, yeah? I thought we were—"

"You thought wrong. Or more correctly, you *weren't* thinking like a ninja." Sasori turned and gave him a sharp look, though it softened when he noticed his partner shivering in the knee-deep snow. "Go back inside." He unfurled the scroll, making a sign; Hiruko was summoned in a puff of smoke, landing with a muffled thump on the snow.

"You're going to Kumo *alone*, yeah?" Deidara asked incredulously, shaking his head as Sasori stepped up onto his favorite puppet's back. "That's stupid."

"No, it's easier. You and Hinata would only slow me down, anyway. It'd be easier for me to sneak in the gates by myself than trying to guide you two in after me."

The blonde doggedly followed him, doing his best not to think about his freezing feet. "But what are we supposed to do while you're gone?"

"I'll only be gone today; I should be back sometime tonight. *Surely* you can entertain yourselves until then?" Sasori sat on top of Hiruko, checking to make sure all of the parts worked correctly in the snow. "Now get back inside, brat. You're going to get frostbite."

"But—"

"*Inside. Now.*"

With that, Sasori left, leaving a freezing, frowning blonde behind.

Deidara made his way back to the house, now regretting going outside without shoes on. He was met at the door by a confused kunoichi, who was in the process of pulling on her coat. "Don't bother... Sasori-danna's gonna go on to Kumo alone, yeah. He says it'll be faster..."

"What are we going to do, then...?" she asked quietly, taking her jacket back off. He shrugged and sat down in the armchair that had been vacated by the puppet master, glancing at the fire. The cobalt-haired girl sat down in front of him, crossing her legs in front of her. "Um..."

"Do you think we really did see that ghost last night?" he asked suddenly, pulling at the hem of his shirt.

She looked down at her lap, then nodded. "Yeah... B-But I had thought it *was* a dream until you just brought it up..."

"I did, too, until I saw that I was missing some clay, yeah. But... was there really a *ghost*?"

"I don't know," she said immediately, then brightened. "L-Let's not think about it. Sasori said that Yutaka had placed his chakra in security systems; it could have been some sort of illusion projected to scare off intruders, or some other s-silly thing like that... I'm sure there's a reason for it, Deidara-kun."

Deidara could only nod at the pleading tone she had unconsciously used for the last sentence.

"Right... so then, we have a day to burn, to ourselves for the first time... in what, eight months or something, yeah?" he smiled at her, folding his hands behind his head.

"So how shall we celebrate our newfound freedom?" she asked, while trying to count off the months on her fingers. "Yes, I think eight months... or seven..."

"That's a long time to have a chaperone, yeah..." They both stared awkwardly down at their bare feet, wondering how to pass the time. They were in an unfamiliar house, practically under house arrest, and possibly with some sort of latent security jutsu (or ghost). They were dangerously close to an enemy village, and it was possible that any stray Kumo-nin could stumble onto the cottage at any time. It was a sticky situation. "Want to build a snowman?"

--.-

The day was spent as it should have been; with snow, competitions and a very weird game of tag. The area around the house was littered with snowballs, half-built snowmen, demolished ice sculptures and the occasional kunai or clay creation. Deidara had tried to see if he could, in fact, fly in the thin air, but after a few futile flaps, his birds were all grounded miserably. He then had turned to making land-based organisms, though not his medium of choice. (Hinata had tried to get him to make a unicorn, but it was not to be.)

She had also discovered that water froze very quickly outside. Soon she and Deidara were hauling buckets of water outside, trying to make a skating rink, though it turned out to be more of a slide. Their first run at it didn't turn out quite as well as imagined, however; Hinata had slid down the ice-coated chute, just to find another one of the Land of Lightning's famous hot springs. She had managed to catch herself on her feet on the surface of the water, not wanting a repeat of last time.

Deidara, unfortunately, nearly replicated the event anyway. But luck was with them, for once, and the two ninja gingerly walked back over to the snow, laughing nervously.

They decided to head in at that point, heading back to their adopted house arm in arm. They passed under a magnificently huge evergreen, staring up at the frost-covered needles. Hinata couldn't help but smile; she had always *loved* snow-covered trees. Then again, she loved most everything about winter. Her birthday being in that season having nothing to do with it, of course. "These trees are so pretty..." she sighed, tilting her head to the side.

"Mm, I guess, yeah..." Deidara evidently didn't share her enthusiasm for nature. Unfortunately for the blonde, nature had a way of evening things out. With a crack, one of the boughs above them swung down, dumping its load of snow on top of its victim, completely missing Hinata. A few moments later, the branch itself also hit Deidara in the head, much to his irritation.

Hinata was using all of her willpower not to laugh, instead choking out, "I don't think the tree liked

that, Deidara-kun..."

Dusting snow out of his hair, he only shrugged. "I'll keep it in mind not to offend nature too much, yeah." Instinctively he looked up again, just in case of further retaliation, but it looked like he had received his punishment for the day. They made it mercifully back to the temporary headquarters without too much more snow going down the back of his shirt.

The sunset against the expanse of snowy horizon was quite pretty, but unfortunately, it only lasted a few sparse minutes before it was officially dark. Hinata lit a fire, warming the house back up, while Deidara ransacked their dwindling supply of food. Soon they were both cocooned in blankets in front of the fire, sipping ramen and staring at the flames, completely comfortable.

It wasn't long, however, until they thought about the night before again. The 'ghost'... or jutsu. Hinata secretly hoped it wasn't a ghost, thought it would no doubt be easier to ignore a ghost than a jutsu that they were probably supposed to disarm.

"We'll just wait to see what Sasori-danna says about the target..." Deidara murmured, acknowledging the unspoken things between them. She mutely nodded, keeping her white eyes on the fire. "Besides... I don't think it can hurt us, anyway, yeah."

"Yeah..." she echoed, glancing around, as if the ethereal thing might pop up at any minute. "Sasori should be back soon, too."

"He should... yeah..." Deidara nodded. After a few moments, then he added, "And if we *should* see that thing again, we should face it like ninja, yeah. We need to find out... what kind of jutsu or remnant of a jutsu it is, yeah."

Hinata screwed up her face and ducked her head in an attempt not to smile. *So he really is worried about that 'ghost'*, she thought, at least smiling in her mind. "We can do that. I-I'll see if there are any chakra lines connecting to it, like in a jutsu..."

"Yeah." He grinned at her, then turned back to watching the fire.

-.-.-

They went to sleep before Sasori returned. It almost felt like they were kids again, though Deidara had no idea of her age, but they started laughing and giggling and couldn't get to sleep. It was fun, without a chaperone. They started just laughing about any old thing, but mostly things that they had somehow accomplished. Eventually, however, they ran out of mutual jokes; they had been together less than a year, after all. The duo resorted to stories about their past.

"Remember that first fairytale you told me?" she asked, covering a yawn with her hand.

"Mmhmm...?"

"Well, at first, I thought you were some sort of stalker or you were threatening me. You were that dead-on," she admitted, almost thoughtfully.

Deidara smile to himself. "I had figured as much, yeah."

"But then I realized that you were just making it up as you went along, especially after we got

caught on that tree." She had to stifle a chuckle. "Y-You should have seen your face... you had no idea what had happened until it was all over."

"Well, I hadn't expected that to happen, yeah!" He began laughing, and soon she joined in. "I bet my face almost looked as funny as yours when Kabuto and I went into the hot springs with you."

"N-Not even cl-close! I was just embarrassed, and you two were so *silly*. You just looked so surprised and innocent, like a kicked puppy or something."

"So I'm a kicked puppy, yeah?" She snorted, trying to apologize, but he waved her off. "Heh... remember Usuki, that chick who thought we were married?"

"No, Hana-san thought we were married. Usuki-chan just wanted to marry *you*," she replied slyly, turning over onto her stomach and propping her chin in her palms. The Hyuuga gave him the closest thing to a smug smirk he'd ever seen her have, and that sight alone almost made him crack up all over again. "We're supposed to name our firstborn after her, remember?"

"Oh yeah... Well I don't like that name. Let's name our kid..."

"Anything that *doesn't* start with an 'H', please,"

"Sure, yeah. Hmm... I think I like the name Ryoko."

"That's a nice name... I think my favorite name is—"

Both of them jumped guiltily when they heard a voice say behind them, "What are you two doing?" Thinking it was Sasori, they turned—and came face-to-face with the ghost/jutsu/white form of Yutaka. "I thought I told you that this is not a hotel, miss."

Deidara bit back another scream, slowly reaching for his clay pouch, which was on a pillow just inches away... But Yutaka shot him a glare, and it froze him in his tracks. "L-Look, yeah, you can't do anything to us 'cause you can't touch us..."

"You, you're a ninja, aren't you?" the apparition asked suddenly, giving him a flat look. "If you are, then you should know better than anyone that I don't need to *touch* you to *hurt* you... honestly, children these days..."

"But—But you're not even alive..." the girl ventured timidly, raising her hand.

"...What does that have to do with anything?" At his answer, she paled to a white that almost matched Yutaka's own pallid complexion.

"How are we supposed to fight a *ghost*!?" Deidara hissed at her, trying to be discreet. The 'ghost' noticed, however, and scowled. She shrugged helplessly in response.

"This is *my* house, and I'm not letting you Akatsuki defile it. I thought I chased your kind away from here once, but it looks like I'm going to have to make my point again." His lip curled, and he looked darkly between the two.

"Well, if we can't fight him, at-at least he can't fight us, r-right?" she asked with a nervous chuckle, shifting back away from him a little.

"Wrong!" Deidara instinctively ducked as he turned, grabbing desperately at his clay. He heard a shriek, and as he turned, already forming the fastest bird he could think of, he saw the Hyuuga girl desperately fending off the specter with her *Juuken*. Yutaka appeared almost afraid of the chakra-

filled hands after the first glancing blow, and hastily backed up.

With her newfound power over him, she advanced, but Yutaka decided on another route—using a shield against her attacks. Unfortunately, the shield he chose was Deidara himself. The explosives user spat a bird out of one of his mouths just in time to feel a cold sensation wash over him. The cobalt-haired girl stopped with her hand right in front of his chest, surprised to see the white thing go *through* Deidara. (He was more surprised, of course.)

Yutaka peeked over Deidara's shoulder, looking like a cat who had just found a mouse hole. "You won't attack each other...?"

The blonde ran for it, knowing what was coming next. Sasori had already tried this on them before, and it had worked. They wouldn't dare attack each other for *real*, mission or not. The cold sensation returned, however, this time concentrated in his head. For a moment, his whole body felt numb.

"Looks like—ack!" Deidara's heart pounded in his ears as feeling rushed back into his limbs, staring wide-eyed at a just-as-surprised Yutaka. "You're a strong-willed child. But let's see if your partner fares as well..."

"Ehh—what?" Deidara tilted his head to the side, unsure of what just happened. The kunoichi however, gasped and ran to hide behind him, clinging to the back of his shirt. "Bya-chan, c'mon, we can beat this asshole, yeah!"

"How do you propose that?" Yutaka inquired tranquilly. "The Akatsuki wants my money, yes? You don't know where it is and *you* can't harm me. If you were any sort of ninja you'd know that this is a stalemate and you need to be bargaining with me."

"Or we could ransack the house looking for your stash, yeah," the Iwa-nin replied with a feral grin. "How would you like it if I turned your precious house into my next masterpiece?" The white man opposite him didn't seem fazed by the threat.

"And then the chakra system I've buried in the walls and ground will destruct because of lack of control. Pyromaniac or not, how will you go up against an explosion that isn't yours?"

"We can stay here all night and banter," the girl broke in suddenly, almost forcefully, "Or we can figure out *why* Yutaka-san is here."

"Because you stupid Akatsuki ninja keep annoying me."

"I mean... you said you had chakra in the walls and ground," she turned her Byakugan eyes on him, studying the chakra around her. "That can be feeding you... B-But what are you? Um, spirit, or some sort of genjutsu- or ninjutsu-based security to try to keep people out of your home...?"

Yutaka's white eyes glittered like the snow outside. "Wouldn't you like to know, miss?"

She seemed resolute, and stepped out from behind Deidara. "Answer me. I can see that you are living off of the chakra you've implanted into the area, and it wouldn't be hard for me to block it for awhile. Would you like that, Yutaka-san?"

"...Well, aren't you the smart one... you can see chakra, eh? That's just like..." He leaned in, narrowing his eyes. "That's just like the Byakugan in Konohagakure. Now that I mention it... you look an awful like one of those goddamn Hyuuga..."

She pursed her lips, pinking slightly. "I-I don't see how it concerns you. The fact of the matter is

—"

Yutaka broke into a grin, however, as he interrupted her. "You *are* a Hyuuga. My, my, what a lot of courage you have to come this close to Kumo! You know the leaders are still looking for a way to obtain those pretty little eyes of yours, *especially* after Konoha had the guts to send that last Hyuuga with the seal."

All of the blush ran out of her cheeks, and her face was whiter than her eyes. Deidara blinked, wondering what *she* was hiding in her past. He never knew that the Cloud had any business with Konoha, let alone the Hyuuga clan. "Th-That doesn't m-matter." she stated in a forced voice. "You can't do anything about it in your state, an-and if you try anything, I'll cut off all of the chakra in this house."

Deidara hadn't know she could do *that*. Then he decided that she was probably bluffing, but if Yutaka knew she was a Hyuuga, then he probably believed her.

"I'll just overshadow your blonde friend again, then. I'll drain *his* chakra. How would you like that, miss?"

"D-Deidara-kun has his chakra drained, and you'll end up just getting kicked out and running out of energy," she said in a low voice, frowning.

"I'll take over *your* body then, miss." Yutaka grinned gleefully, rubbing his hands together. "Can't do much, then, huh?"

She just smiled ruefully, however. "I don't have that much chakra, either."

"But if I drain yours, you can't block this house, can you?"

Deidara stepped in, saving her. "If she can't block it, yeah, I'll just blow it up. That'll disperse the chakra into the air and then you're royally screwed." He held up a pair of hawks, who fluttered sleepily and stared at the specter with their hollow eyes. "Now that we have a bargaining chip... mind telling us where we can pick up that money you owe us, yeah?"

Yutaka narrowed his eyes, taking a soundless step backward. "...I *can* overshadow other things. Anything that has chakra I can take over. Animals don't have the will to resist me; I could take over a carcass if I wanted. You can't corner me, Akatsuki."

The blonde smiled mentally. The man was beginning to get desperate and to panic. They had him on the ropes now, and it wouldn't be a matter of time before they either eradicated this whatever-he-was, or got the money. Sasori would be *so* pissed when he got back and saw that they either finished the mission without him—or blew the house up...

"I don't see any handy dead animals, yeah. And the chances that you'll find a live one out in the snow are slim. Do you want to gamble with whatever life you have left?" he asked, taking a step forward. Yutaka took a step back, away from them.

The kunoichi caught on and also advanced, smiling. "You have messed with the Akatsuki for the last time, Yutaka-san. Now pay up or you're going to get hurt."

That was when they heard the door open, and Sasori call out, "I'm back, brats. The mission is over; Yutaka is dead."

The pair looked at each other, eyes wide and fearful. Yutaka smiled deviously, murmuring, "Is that *Sasori*...?"

-.-.-

"You know, this was pretty fucking gay. I'll admit it, I didn't have a speck of fun sacrificing any of those heathens and this bitch is just heavy and annoying. I mean, I thought a Jashindamn *demon* would have a bit more power, y'know? Deidara got his fucking arm ripped off when he fought the Ichibi, that pansy-ass, but this was just too easy..."

"Hidan."

"Yeah?"

"*Shut the hell up.*" Kakuzu snarled, reminding himself yet again that his partner was immortal; he'd only waste his own energy by attempting to kill him. But it would no doubt make him feel better to break a few bones.

"Jeez, I was just trying to fucking *communicate* with you. Throwing out a damn olive branch and you just burn it with your PMS-y attitude." Hidan said with a roll of his eyes. "All of the other pairs in the group are at least gay for each other, and here you are just tellin' me to shut up..."

"That's it, I've had it! I've fucking had it with you, Hidan!" Kakuzu shouted, turning on his partner. The Jashinist only looked mildly annoyed at being interrupted, and dropped the unconscious Nibi. "I'll shut you up for good if you don't zip it this minute!"

Hidan stared at him for a long time. It was also the longest he had been perfectly quiet in Kakuzu's memory. The treasurer was about to congratulate himself on a job well done when his partner spoke up. "You know... with a temper like that, you could make a damn fine Jashinist." He stooped to pick the kunoichi back up, and started walking down the path again. Kakuzu sighed, and wondered if that was supposed to be an insult or a compliment. "Hey, speaking of potential converts, ain't the bitch and the two art-freaks supposed to be in the Land of Lightning?"

"Oh yeah... I had almost forgot." Kakuzu lied, tugging his hood off. He had been getting sweaty, snow or not. "I wanna check in on Sasori, and see if he could handle the mission. I want that fucking money. Yutaka's managed to skip out on it one too many times."

"This guy must owe you his damn *soul* in money if you actually want to go after him. Why haven't you just nailed him before, then?" Hidan asked skeptically.

"Last time he faced off against the Akatsuki—we lost. Orochimaru needed to transfer to a new body and Sasori was forced to learn how to turn live body parts into puppet parts. The man is paranoid, knows how to set a trap, and can do things with his chakra I've never even fucking *seen* before. We had mostly put off collecting the money because Leader-sama wanted to go himself... but circumstances got in the way." Kakuzu shrugged. "Anyway, it's more than a newbie like you should worry about."

Hidan looked indignant at the term 'newbie', but didn't complain. Instead, he just asked, "So we're going to go check in on them? You wanna kill that asshole that much?"

"Yup. Let's go, they should only be an hour or two away."

Next Chapter: A 'ghost'? Or what is this spirit of Yutaka really? And more importantly, is Sasori in trouble? Hidan and Kakuzu decide to stop in, but will they be in time to do anything?

Pure As Snow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sasori had given up on the mission, and had resigned himself to be the victim of the leader's rampage yet again. The target was dead, and knowing Yutaka, they would never find the money. Large sum or not, ninja knew how to hide their treasures, even from other ninja.

That was when he heard a shout and a boom from the living room. He seriously thought about turning around right then, and walking out on the two forever. They deserved it for some of the things they put him through. Instead, though, he just kicked the snow off of his sandals and walked out into the room.

The Suna-nin was met with a pair of white eyes—white eyes that *weren't* Hinata's. Sasori just cocked his head however, remaining perfectly calm, if a bit curious. "...Hmm?"

"So it *is* you, Sasori. You haven't grown at all since we last saw each other, you know that?" Sasori recognized that voice, and now that the owner of said voice backed up out of his field of vision, he recognized him as well. Though it was physically, naturally and psychologically impossible... it was Yutaka. Completely white, older than he remember, but just as grizzled and defensive.

"What are you supposed to be?" he asked flatly, somewhat unsurprised. Yutaka had been an insanely paranoid shinobi; this was most likely some twisted trap left for whoever found his house first, to either attack or scare.

"Sasori-danna, run—"

"Quiet, brat." Sasori said immediately, more on reflex than anything else. Deidara looked a little insulted that he was interrupted. "Yutaka, *what* is this?"

"Those two seem to think I'm a ghost. Maybe I am one..."

"You're no ghost. There's no such thing." the redhead stated, lip curling slightly. This wasn't how he pictured his return. This wasn't how he pictured Yutaka, either, but that was seemingly beside the point at hand.

"Probably not," the white specter allowed, smirking. "Say, Sasori... you don't happen to have one of those puppets of yours handy, would you? You *are* still an artist, aren't you?"

Sasori could see his plan in an instant, but no doubt Yutaka planned that. He was counting on the fact that he was just like he was all those years ago; depending on his puppets for weapons. He wanted to use the puppet as a substitute body—but he had no idea how close he was standing to one at that moment. The redhead got a little nervous at the thought, and discreetly took a step backward.

Yutaka noticed, however. "No puppets for me to play with again, Sasori-kun?"

He kept his expression neutral, and turned his muddy eyes on his partner instead. Deidara looked outright panicky, shifting from foot to foot anxiously as he watched the interaction between the veterans. Hinata looked just as worried. Sasori noticed a miniature hawk fluttering agitatedly near the blonde's shoulder, but he couldn't think of a plan that incorporated the clay without seriously injuring someone.

"You owe the Akatsuki a debt, Yutaka." Sasori said finally, returning his flat gaze to the sallow man. "Without a body you can't harm any of us, and I know that the Hyuuga can probably cut your chakra off from its source. In short: you give us the money, and we won't kill you."

Yutaka sensed the lie. "You can't bargain with me with my own life."

They were at a textbook stalemate, Sasori knew. There couldn't be any way out of this with outside intervention. If he were to attack, it would have no effect. Potentially Deidara's so-called art could do some damage, but he—or Hinata, really—couldn't get away in time without tipping off Yutaka. And Hinata, though she was the only one who could evidently do any real harm to him, couldn't attack. Because Yutaka knew she could hurt him, and he would be forced into a corner, and potentially figure out that Sasori, himself, was a puppet.

Classic standstill.

Undoubtedly Yutaka knew this, but what none of them knew was *if* they'd get outside intervention, and whether or not it'd be in his favor. Moreover, no one knew whether or not there would be any benefit to waiting, rather than attempting a fight to see where it went.

Unfortunately, there was one thing that Sasori overlooked. One small detail, and it was enough to give Yutaka an edge.

The target himself didn't know *why* it was a stalemate; he didn't know that he could use Sasori's puppet body as his own marionette. But the fact that he wasn't being attacked gave him a clue, and set the old ninja to thinking.

"So what will it be, Yutaka?" Sasori asked in a low voice, his eyes glinting dangerously.

The apparition appeared to think. Sasori was almost dreading what his answer would be, when finally Yutaka spoke again. "I think..." There was another excruciatingly long pause. "I think I'm going to have to decline your offer, Sasori-kun."

Yutaka darted forward, but Hinata reacted just as quickly. She gathered chakra into her hand to cut the apparition from that plane of existence, but he saw the *Juuken* attack just in time and sidestepped her. Deidara and Sasori were also moving, the former going in for an assault, the other getting away. Yutaka, however, made a beeline for the redhead, and Sasori looked down just in time to see the wanna-be ghost disappear through his chest. He felt something vaguely cold, but at that moment, he was suddenly looking into the black holes of the clay hawk, which had very nearly run into him in its pursuit of Yutaka.

Sasori felt his hand jerk up, as if by its own free will. *Shit, shit*, he repeated in his mind, also finding himself unable to speak. He experienced a brief moment of reprieve, however, as Yutaka stepped out of him, looking gleeful. "Oh my... you *didn't*, Sasori-kun. I never thought that you would take your jutsu to *this* extreme."

"You—" Unfortunately, the apparition stepped back into his body, taking physical control once more. This time, Sasori felt a little dizzy, and his vision began to blur. *Damn him, what kind of screwed up jutsu did he create?!* He thought vehemently, mentally shaking his head to try to clear his mind. It didn't work.

He felt his arms move forward, as if pulled by invisible strings. The irony was not lost on him, though it wasn't appreciated. Yutaka moved Sasori's hands together to form seals, though finally the redhead relaxed a little. His potential for ninjutsu was very limited, thanks to his specialization. That meant no jutsu, and the only way Yutaka would find his assortment of weapons was by

accident.

Of course, it sort of ruined most of his chances with the fact that he had more weapons stored in his body than any of his other puppets.

Hinata scowled darkly, scanning him slowly with her Byakugan. Sasori hoped that there was something she could see with those eyes of hers, something that they could use. Because if Yutaka managed to find a suitable weapon—or worse, one of his summoning scrolls—there was no doubt in the Suna shinobi's mind that the other two would die. Yutaka was no pushover, and neither was Sasori.

Hinata took a cautious step forward, and Sasori was drawn backward a step. She suddenly darted forward and pulled back her hand for one of her *Juuken* strikes, but Yutaka easily caught her wrist. The Hyuuga tried to pull back out of his grasp, but he wouldn't let go. Then they both heard a loud *crack*, and she shouted in pain, her other hand flying to her broken wrist. "L-Let go, Sasori!"

Yutaka grinned, and let her go, as she asked. Deidara looked scandalized. Hinata whimpered and scampered back to the relative safety of his side, still holding her arm gingerly. Sasori felt somewhat repulsed by injuring the rather harmless girl, but it wasn't like he had a choice in the matter.

"Well, I have to say, this is working out perfectly. Looks like I get to kill another one of your partners, eh, Sasori-kun?" Yutaka asked, advancing in the puppeteer's body. Sasori sighed in his head; Orochimaru hadn't been killed, but severely wounded. And he had been a Sannin, of a much higher caliber than Deidara. Right now, his partner's only real chance for survival was to either put Sasori out of commission or make a run for it.

As long as Yutaka didn't have any weapons—or didn't know how to properly control them, thank the gods for his puppetry skills—they could still just dismantle him or something. Hopefully Deidara would realize this, and act upon it. Before there were worse injuries than a broken wrist.

Yutaka took their lapse of attacks to further inspect Sasori's modifications. The redhead was wishing vigorously that he wouldn't find any of his dangerous toys. "...Ehh? What's this? A summoning scroll...?" One of them like that.

--.-

Deidara honestly had *no idea* what to do. Yutaka had found one of Sasori's scrolls, and he knew little to nothing of his partner's other puppets. Hiruko, he could probably take on again, but he knew that Hiruko was only one of many puppets he had. He just watched sullenly as Sasori's body unrolled the scroll, watching curiously as the ink disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Unfortunately, a puppet none of them had either seen before appeared to be hovering in front of them. It was clad in a ratty black cloak, with dull, yellow-ish eyes, accented with black. Deidara had no idea what it was supposed to be, except that it looked sort of menacing. He glanced down at the girl at his side, but it appeared that she didn't recognize it, either.

But there was one small stroke of luck they got. Yutaka didn't know what jutsu to use, nor how to create the chakra strings. He couldn't control the creepy-looking marionette. Deidara allowed himself a grin, but it vanished when the pallid apparition appeared, stepping out of his partner with

his arms crossed.

Sasori acted immediately, jumping away from Yutaka and connecting his chakra strings to his puppet with an evil grin. "I can't believe you were stupid enough to pick the Sandaime..."

Yutaka didn't appear overly worried. The other two did, though, and high-tailed it out of the immediate vicinity, edging around the hulking black thing.

"I think I recognize this puppet..." he mused, tapping his chin. "Have I seen him before?"

"Perhaps, when he was alive." Sasori responded elusively, putting it between him and Yutaka defensively. The specter took a step forward, paused for a moment, and then rushed forward. The redhead was expecting this, and jumped out of the way, ducking and sidestepping once he landed. The target followed him relentlessly, a half step behind.

Deidara had no idea how to stop Yutaka. His art couldn't harm him—just piss him off—and the Hyuuga really was the only one who could do any sort of harm to the ghost-like thing, anyway.

But then, looking around at the room they were fighting in, he got an idea. Yutaka had been very possessive of his house, earlier...

He perched his active bird on the windowsill, and then shouted, "*Katsu!*" The wall vanished in the explosion, letting in a gush of winter air, and halting both Sasori and Yutaka.

"You... what the hell did you do to my house?!" the target demanded. Deidara just grinned, sticking his hands back into the clay pouch. Yutaka decided to change tactics and instead started forming seals. The blonde warily watched, wondering if he *could* utilize jutsu... As Yutaka finished, he didn't say a word, and instead just glared at Deidara. He was just wondering if it was a ruse when something—almost like wind—threw him out of the house. He landed in the snow with a muffled thump, jumping back up a moment later, shivering. His coat was still in the house, which was now a good distance away from him.

Yutaka seemed to melt out of the air in front of him, smirking. "I thought you knew that I had chakra built into my house and the ground below you. I can utilize it at any time and attack with that pure energy." Deidara scowled; so it had been chakra, not wind, that had kicked him out of the house.

"Well, I guess that only leaves the air for me then, yeah." He grinned at him, spitting out a clay owl from his palm. With a sign and a puff of smoke, the artist was airborne, circling as he watched the scene below him. Yutaka appeared angry, but the Hyuuga had come out of the house—with the foresight to put a coat on—and was busying him by trying to tag him with her chakra-filled hands.

Sasori also exited the wrecked cottage, forcing his puppet out before him. Something black and sand-looking was hovering about it, dancing into different shapes before finally settling on what looked to be a large mass of senbon-like needles. Deidara wondered if they could hurt Yutaka, but then shrugged it off. At least it was something.

The navy-haired kunoichi was pushed back by the same chakra blast as he, and a moment afterward, Yutaka disappeared. He had already been somewhat hard to see against the white of the snow, but now he was completely gone. The bright moonlight on the snow didn't help, either.

Deidara swooped low enough for his owl's wingtips to brush some of the trees dotting the landscape. He had it hover over Sasori, shouting down, "Where did he go, yeah?!"

"I don't know, but if he can exploit dormant chakra, it probably won't be pretty when we see him

again." he replied tensely, kicking at the snow beneath him. Sasori looked up at his partner, then asked, "Where's your coat? You're going to freeze before you can fight."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll go get it..." Deidara rolled his eyes, heading for the half-destroyed cottage once more. As he was pulling on his coat, he heard the heiress scream. Whirling around and leaping back onto his bird, he spotted Sasori, holding her up by the neck with his puppet. "What the hell, Sasori-danna?!"

The puppet master turned to regard him, but the blonde saw that it must have been Yutaka. Or rather, it had better have been Yutaka. "I'll deal with you next." It was undoubtedly Yutaka.

Deidara dove down on his bird, and once he was low enough, he jumped off of it. He hit the snow running, and used his momentum to tackle Sasori, pinning him to the ground. The kunoichi was dropped immediately. "I can't catch you as a ghost, but I can certainly catch you now, yeah," Deidara snarled, pulling back his arm for a punch.

But then, the image of Sasori, coughing up blood with the two swords in his chest flashed across his mind. Deidara stared down at his partner below him, hesitating just long enough for him to grin and jerk his hand upward. Next thing he knew, Deidara had several of the black needles sticking out of his chest and neck, missing his vitals but still hurting like hell.

"I must thank Sasori-kun for activating his puppet for me. I had no idea how to use a puppet master jutsu." Yutaka cooed, sitting up as Deidara fell backward, trying to get the senbon out of his body. "My aim is still a little off... but I'm sure that I can deal with that."

The blue-eyed blonde was saved by the Hyuuga girl, who cut through the chakra strings like butter with her *Juuken*. The black puppet dropped to the ground, lifeless once more, as its needles disintegrated into what looked like dark sand. She then rushed over and helped Deidara up, pulling out the rest of the senbon.

Yutaka grinned at them through Sasori. "Puppet or not, I'm sure Sasori-kun has lots of little toys handy in case of such a situation," he said dismissively, pulling a katana out of his arm. "This will work much better than one of his inane 'masterpieces'."

-.-.-

Hinata was somewhat relieved when he pulled out the sword. Because if he was going to use that, it would become short-range combat, and she could probably pull something off with her gentle fist. She didn't know why Deidara had frozen like that, but if he was going to continue that, it meant that it was up to her to stop Yutaka. Or at least put Sasori out of commission.

Genjutsu doesn't work on him... and he can't feel pain. His only vital area is his heart. Yutaka doesn't know how to use Sasori's chakra, so that's good, she surmised, pulling Deidara up to stand beside her. "Deidara-kun... you just stay out of the way." She didn't want him getting hurt any further. It had been luck that made Sasori create needles and not something bigger or deadlier.

"What? No way, yeah!" he protested. "I'm not going to leave you—"

"And *what* can you do against him? You don't want to hurt Sasori, and all of your jutsu is just long-range and high-power." she pointed out, a little haughtily. She didn't mean to be mean, but she really wanted him out of the way, especially since he couldn't do much. Deidara frowned at her,

almost looking hurt.

"Just... be careful, Bya-chan."

"I will." She smiled at him, though she wasn't feeling as courageous as he probably looked. Sure, Sasori couldn't use his puppets now, but he still had several (hundred) weapons. It was just a matter of time before Yutaka found some of the more dangerous ones.

"So you're going to take the noble course and fight me yourself?" Yutaka asked, raising an eyebrow. "You're not thinking like a ninja, miss. Logic dictates that you and the blonde one there should fight; Sasori-kun is stronger than you both. Your best bet would be to kill Sasori-kun... but neither of you really want to do that, do you?"

"You're just desperate." Hinata replied tersely, scanning him yet again with her Byakugan. Her arm hurt where it had been broken and she was definitely feeling the strain of the continued use of her clan's pride, but she could still fight. Still, Sasori's body didn't look any different than it had before. She didn't know *where* to hit it, but perhaps a strong enough disruption *near* him would force Yutaka out. If temporarily.

Yutaka seemed to be operating on the same notion, and wouldn't allow her anywhere near. Hinata felt a shadow pass overhead, and looked up to see Deidara back on his bird. ...*Wait, I thought he couldn't fly in the thin air?! She looked with her Byakugan at the air, and noticed for the first time that there were small swirls of chakra, rising like steam from the ground. Turning her eyes downward, she noticed that Yutaka had placed a root-like system of streams of chakra below them. More of that chakra steam was flowing into Sasori, feeding Yutaka, than what was dissipating into the air. ...If we can drain that chakra, does that mean that Yutaka will disappear?*

It was a sound conclusion, but now the question was *how* to get rid of the surplus of energy. There was quite a lot, and Yutaka could probably survive for days with it. Unless... it dissipated faster when exposed to the open air. It was the only shot they had right then.

Hinata ducked under the next strike, spotting it even with her eyes on the ground. Thank the gods for the Byakugan. "Dei—" Sasori was still faster than her, and he caught her jaw with his fist and sent her flying. The snow caught her fall, but there was going to be an ugly bruise. Shaking snow out of her dark hair, Hinata tried again, "Deidara-kun!"

"Yeah?" he hovered above her worriedly, hanging over the side of the owl's neck.

Hinata realized that she would have to show him *where* to detonate the bombs if she wanted any sort of reaction. She spotted the one furthest from Sasori, and ran down the chakra vein, dragging her toe in it. She pointed to the line, shouting, "Detonate bombs along that line! It should weaken Yutaka!"

He perked up with a grin. "Oh?" In what seemed like a moment, he had his hands full of miniature bombs, dropping them as he flew over the column. Hinata moved onto the next vein she saw, and drew a line there, too. Yutaka had just figured out what she was up to, but he was stopped from attacking her by the first line of explosives detonating.

Hinata watched silently with her Byakugan as the deposit drifted into the night sky and dispersed. Deidara crisscrossed overhead, his bird still airborne. Eventually he'd be grounded as well, but hopefully Yutaka would be gone before that.

When the smoke and steam cleared from the explosions, Sasori was bent over, shaking slightly. Hinata felt ecstatic; it was working *already*! The heiress jumped over the small craters the bombs

created, warily making her way closer to the puppeteer. Sasori looked up sharply at her, and grinned. "Smart plan, miss. But I'll kill you before you can point out any more of those lines." Yutaka said, and he pulled another one of Sasori's summoning scrolls out of his sleeve.

Hinata's eyes widened; he couldn't use puppets, but who knew what else Sasori could summon? The whole scroll disappeared in a wisp of smoke, and there was a small *click* sound. The redhead raised his hand, a small hole opening on his palm, which was facing her. She instinctively ducked and ran, thinking *flamethrower*!

Unfortunately, it was worse. A jet of water strong enough to cut cleanly through the snow, not to mention flesh and bone if it caught up to her. Hinata dove for one of the craters, covering her head with her hands, shrinking down as low as she could. Just over her head, the water cut through the snow, freezing into a hardened band. Below her, she saw a river of chakra, and impulsively she pressed both her hands into the permafrost, focusing her own chakra into it to disrupt it. The chakra, having its way to Yutaka blocked, pooled beneath her, before shooting up out of the ground. She felt a little dizzy from the rush of energy, but it was one less way Yutaka could survive.

She had to keep moving, to keep pointing out where the veins where to Deidara. Otherwise they very possibly couldn't beat him. But that meant potentially exposing herself. Oh, if only there was a way to keep him busy or something, just for a little while...

She jumped up out of the crater, scampering low to the snow, zigzagging to avoid the deadly water. It narrowly missed her several times, but it was getting closer each time. True, the farther she got from Sasori the less power it had, but this was a weapon designed for long-range. She couldn't outrun it.

Luckily for the princess, the water didn't last forever. Just a few moments later, it ran out of its pressure, slowing into a stream that froze at it hit the snow. Yutaka swore loudly, looking for another scroll, possibly for a refill.

Hinata took the opportunity and their distance to point out another vein to Deidara. She drew an arrow, shouting, "Right there! And—there, another one, twenty yards down!" She then ran for cover, just as Yutaka succeeded in finding another scroll. This time it wasn't water; it was the flamethrower she had been dreading.

The upside was that it didn't have nearly the range as the water. The downside was that it was also much harder to dodge. She searched frantically for a way to indicate where more of the lines of chakra were. There wasn't any pattern, but then again, of course there wouldn't have been; Yutaka had been paranoid, Sasori said, and he wouldn't dare leave them in anything but a random arrangement.

Then it hit her.

Hinata blinked in realization, sucking in a soft gasp. Why hadn't she seen this before? Her eyes still a little wide from the idea, she turned her head upward to where Deidara was circling. "Play along!" she mouthed, and he nodded uncertainly.

There was no way that Yutaka could know the exact location of his chakra network in its entirety, only the general area. Probably he could feel when he was close to a vein, or hopefully when one of them was destroyed. And because of that Hinata could use his paranoia against him. *She* knew where the network was, and he knew that she knew. She could easily fool him.

Hinata peeked out of the crater she was taking refuge in, tapping her fingers on the crust of snow.

"...Yutaka!" she called hesitantly, both for his sake and for the fact that he still had plenty of fuel for his flamethrowers left. She crawled out into the exposed space, standing up bravely. "Yutaka-san, I'll make a deal with you!"

She took a few steps forward, positioning herself right over one of the bands of chakra that he was existing on, exhaling to relax herself. Sasori turned and regarded her through cold, calculating eyes. He looked at her for a few moments, before holding out one of his hands, palm facing her. With a click, flames rushed out, and Hinata just had enough time to throw herself into a *Kaiten* to protect herself. When she came out of the heavenly spin, she was panting. Mostly from the heat, but also from the chakra expenditure. Sasori scowled, bringing his other hand up to join the other, as Yutaka said, "Nice trick, but I bet you can't keep it up forever."

"N-No! Wait, wait!" she said quickly, shaking her head. "You don't want to do that!"

He dropped one of his arms, cocking his head with a suspicious glare. "And why not?"

"Be-Because! If you kill me, Deidara-kun will just blow all of your chakra network up!" Slowly, Sasori's eyes glided up to look at his partner, who just grinned.

"...He can't see them. He's not a Hyuuga, like you, miss." Yutaka said in a careful monotone. "You can't trick me."

"Oh, yes he can see them! From the air, it's not that hard. I've only been guiding him for the first few, but now he can see them." Sasori visibly relaxed.

"Now I know you're lying."

"Sure, he can't *see* them..." Hinata allowed, looking away. She glanced back at him, adding innocently, "But he's figured out the pattern that they lie in. Deidara-kun's a genius, you know."

Predictably, Sasori's jaw dropped. He quickly regained himself, so to speak, and the white man said shrilly, "You're lying, girl! There is no pattern! I've added them myself over years, and it's completely random!"

"Maybe random for an old man like yourself, and maybe even for old ninjas like Sasori and Orochimaru. But Deidara-kun is the younger generation, and he is the youngest shinobi ever to join the Akatsuki! He's the genius of the group, and figuring out a pattern, no matter how complicated, is *simple* for him," she lied smoothly with a warm smile. "So if you kill me, he'll only kill you."

"So why doesn't he just kill me right now, then?" Sasori's eyes were back on Deidara, and this time there was skepticism in his oppressor's voice.

"Because he doesn't want to kill *me*. Or Sasori. Of course, I can probably get away, but right now the only reason you're alive is because of Sasori," Hinata replied, taking another step forward along the vein. "Of course... since I can get away, he will kill Sasori if need be. After all, you are a threat right now. But we're willing to negotiate."

"You two wouldn't dare kill Sasori-kun. The Akatsuki doesn't operate that way." Yutaka scoffed, crossing his arms.

She smiled thinly, raising an eyebrow. "Are you willing to take the risk? Sasori is one of the *older* ninja of the Akatsuki. I'm sure that Leader-sama wouldn't mind getting a newer model to replace him. I'm sure Sasori wouldn't mind dying if he knew he was taking *you* with him."

"You're bluffing." He replied with a smirk of his own.

"Of course, by waiting to see whether or not I am bluffing, you're only going to weaken yourself." Hinata channeled chakra into her feet, forcing it down into the vein below her with a jump. Like before, the built-up chakra burst up out of the snow, running out into the night sky and dissipating. Sasori stumbled a little, as if caught off balance. Hinata resisted the urge to grin; Yutaka must be feeling the strain by now, right?

Before he could recover, she ran over to the next nearest stream, standing over it like before. He glared up at her, breathing, "You *bitch*..."

"I'm standing over another one right now, Yutaka-san. I can block these one by one, right now, without harming anyone but you. If you attack me again, I'll just use the *Kaiten*. If you succeed in killing me, Deidara-kun will kill *you*. You can't do anything but negotiate with us now," she laid it out for him with a small beam.

"You'll run out of chakra before you can block all of them," Yutaka pointed out.

"True, but then I'll just signal to Deidara-kun to blow the whole place. I'll get out with a *Shunshin* or *Kawarimi*. Your time limit is my chakra," she brought her foot down again, forcing her chakra into the stream as a dam. Another vein blew, trickling out and disappearing. Sasori doubled over, wrapping his arms around his chest, and the sudden killing intent rolling off of the target was nearly palpable.

Hinata's eyes widened, and she ran for the next one as the fire shot out of his hands at her. The flames left a wide swath in the snow, the water created freezing again afterward. She pounced on the chakra below her, forcing nearly all of the rest of her reserves into the snow. Her bluff was running out with her energy, and her only hopes were that Sasori could push Yutaka out of his body, or that Yutaka would want to bargain.

Sasori's body started shaking, as if shivering. When he looked back up at the heiress again, his eyes were no longer glaring, but just furious. He was Sasori again, not Yutaka, she realized with a beam. Unfortunately, it was either a ruse or Yutaka hadn't lost complete control; a second later, he brought his flamethrower back up and nearly caught her with it.

Hinata's mind was racing. Her bluff had only gotten him riled up, and she was running out of chakra. Yes, Deidara could save her in a heartbeat if she so needed, but they needed to rescue the *mission*, really. They somehow needed to get Yutaka's money out of him, and get him out of Sasori. Fast.

She could try to force Yutaka out with her *Juuken*, but that would entail getting closer—much closer than she felt comfortable with—and it was very unlikely to work. Otherwise she could use the last of her chakra to close off one or two more veins and hope that Sasori could take it from there. Deidara could possibly blow up a few more, but she didn't have time to draw arrows or lines to signify where the network was.

As she was running, Hinata noticed one of the veins that were parallel to her route, just a few yards closer to Sasori. It couldn't hurt, really. Her eyes were beginning to feel the strain of the constant Byakugan, but she jumped over onto the snow above it, dragging her foot behind her to create a line for Deidara. "Here!"

The smoke of the explosions and the cold temperatures weren't helping her eyes, either. Soon she'd have to lose her only real edge over Yutaka, too. This fight was rapidly going downhill. Hinata ran for the next nearest one, hastily drawing an arrow down it while the smoke was clearing and before Yutaka could notice.

"I'm running out of clay, yeah! What are we going to do?" Deidara called as he dropped a handful of spiders onto the arrow. Hinata could only shrug.

"Just... wait!" she replied, watching fretfully as the smoke cleared. This time Sasori was stationary, his back to them. He slowly turned to look at them, eyes lidded and looking very tired.

"How much chakra do you have left, hime?" the redhead asked emotionlessly.

"Sasori-danna!"

"Sasori!"

"Answer my question. Yutaka isn't gone, and I'm not going to be able to suppress him at this level. How much chakra do you have left, and how many more of his chakra implants could you destroy?" he snarled harshly. Hinata was a little taken aback by his rudeness, but he was at least thinking like a ninja. Or maybe he was just mad at her for calling him old.

"Umm... one, probably. Maybe two small ones," she said, properly chastised for her enthusiasm. "Not many."

"Deidara, how much clay do you have left?"

"Not much, yeah. Not very much at all. Plus it's getting harder to fly, yeah, without the chakra boost." he said with a shake of his blonde head.

"Hmm..." Sasori was still motionless, but closed his eyes to think. Reopening them and giving the two younger ninja a sharp look, he stated, "Yutaka is losing power. Deidara, if you combine the rest of your clay into one bomb, you could be able to blanket the area with the explosion. That should get rid of the rest of that infernal chakra network..."

"But... how would *you* escape that—"

"I *wouldn't*." Sasori cut in coldly. "Think like a ninja here, Deidara. You won't be able to kill Yutaka—for good—without taking out his power source. And you can't do that without carpet bombing the area. You can then go to Kumogakure and see my spy—his name is Kito, and he should be on ANBU duty tonight—and he should be able to tap into Yutaka's fund to withdraw the money. You can still save this mission."

"The mission isn't—"

Once again, Sasori cut him off. "The mission is *everything*. Act your goddamn age and rank and *grow up*." he hissed, narrowing his eyes. "You can't grow a heart in the Akatsuki, brat, but it's about time you grew a spine. I thought your Jinchuuriki mission would do that, but it's only made you clingy and weak."

Deidara looked crossed between sulking and punching him. So instead, Hinata turned to the redhead and slapped him as hard as she could. His head was jerked to the side, but he hadn't flinched. "Y-You!" she spat, trying to come up with the proper words. "We are trying to *save* you! Don't you think at all before you speak?!"

"Don't overstep your boundaries." Sasori said quietly, looking away. "Yutaka could hear everything we just said, and is trying to fight for control again. If he wins, you're not going to be able to weaken him enough without destroying the mountainside."

"Sasori-danna, why don't *you* think like a damn ninja?!" Deidara snarled, seizing him by the

shoulders. "If we come back from a mission without you, after the debacle earlier, what would Leader-sama think?! He'll have us both executed!"

"Yet again, I am amused to see that your usage of 'yeah' is a conscious effort." Sasori replied with a wry smile.

Deidara gave him a shove, and his partner fell down in the snow. "You're a fucking asshole, *yeah*. ...Come on, Bya-chan. We can destroy those veins *without* killing the noble bastard."

"Deidara, damn it, think for once in your life!" Sasori shouted, shutting his eyes. "You can't win wars without sacrifices!"

"I *am* thinking. The Akatsuki may have taken away my family and my village, but it is *not* going to take my partner, yeah. You can't order me around if you can't move, yeah." He grinned savagely, though he was getting a little desperate. Hinata could see the internal battle raging within him; the age-old 'save the mission or save a comrade'. She was a little confused as to what he meant when he said the Akatsuki had taken his family, but that would be a question for another day.

"Sasori, we can get another way out of this. You don't have to... um... die. Really," she reassured him with a hesitant smile. He was so eager to finish this mission, even if it meant dying in the process... she had to wonder if he didn't have an ulterior motive.

"You're just stalling and you're both being *idiots*!" the Suna-nin snapped, giving his head a small shake. "Yutaka is going to gain control of my body back soon, and he is going to kill you both! You have to save the mission, and rid the world of Yutaka! *Damn it Deidara do it!*"

"No! There is another way out of here. If we can both destroy two, that's four more, yeah. Yutaka would be weak enough not to be able to do anything—"

"It's getting to the point where it doesn't matter, he can survive on smaller amounts of chakra—"

"—We're not going to blow up the whole hillside—"

"—You're going to have to if you want to live—"

Hinata watched them go back and forth, feeling rather left out. This whole battle she almost had a semblance of leadership, but now it had just gone back to their usual bickering. True, the stakes were a bit higher than normal, and there was desperation in both parties, but they were still arguing. Like normal.

"—There is going to be another way, there has to—"

"—There isn't, Deidara! Now follow orders and—"

"—I'm not going to follow your *orders*! We're *partners*—"

"—You're not a child anymore, so don't act like it—"

"—I'm not acting like a child, Sasori! You are, if anyone—"

"—Ninja lose comrades all the time! You're going to have to *get used to it*—"

"—Not the Akatsuki!" Deidara's voice was getting higher, and he seemed on the verge of blowing something up. Possibly Sasori. "Everyone always goes on and on about how great the Akatsuki is and how hard it is to kill one of them, and here you are, in a life-or-death situation for the second

time in as many months!"

"Well I'm so sorry to have *disillusioned* you, yet again." Sasori said quietly, lip curling.

"Are you so eager to die? Do you have a death wish, are you suicidal, yeah?!" he demanded, planting his fists on his hips. "Or are you just sadistic and masochistic enough to want me to kill you?!"

"If you would actually *listen*, you'd realize that this is the only way—"

"No, it's not!"

Sasori tilted his head to one side, regarding him coolly. "...Then what do you propose, Deidara? Keep in mind that there *is* a time limit. It'd say Yutaka will gain back control of my body and kill you both in about... five minutes."

"...There has to be another choice. How do you *know* that blocking four more veins won't kill Yutaka?"

"*Because*. Plus, it's not worth the risk. If it doesn't, you're both drained, and Yutaka will kill you both. Plus, he *can* hear what we're saying, and he knows that you were both bluffing. There's nothing else you can do." He was completely calm, almost businesslike. "It's kill me, or die yourselves. Eventually Leader-sama will send another team up here to investigate, and they will kill me and Yutaka. It's hardly an eternal life."

Deidara frowned, furrowing his brow in thought. Hinata was about to intervene, possibly by kicking the redhead while he was down, but she was stopped.

Sasori squeezed shut his eyes, shouting, "Damn it, Deidara! Listen to reason and *kill me*!"

"No!" he yelled, just as loud. "*I'm not going to lose you again*!"

The only sound was the whistle of the wind against the snow.

Then, slowly, Sasori picked himself up, brushing invisible dust off of his uniform. "Touching. I'll have to remember that you don't like to lose things." Yutaka stated, grinning viciously. They were less than two feet from him when he found the blades in Sasori's back, too.

-.-.-

Kakuzu didn't quite know what to expect, since it was the brat's first real active mission since the Jinchuuriki one. Sasori had been on edge, too, lately. And while he wasn't exactly close with the puppeteer, they had been on quite a few missions together, and they were veterans. Regardless, Kakuzu wasn't expecting a shouting match between Deidara and Sasori, and then Sasori attacking his junior partner.

He didn't know what it was about, but he knew that if *they* were fighting, the mission wasn't going well. Leaving Hidan and the unconscious Nibi girl, practically teleported behind Sasori, picking him up by the back of the cloak. He very nearly got a hand cut off for his troubles, too. "What the hell is going on here?!"

"Ehh? Who—" Someone, who very much *wasn't* Sasori, was talking in the redhead's body. Kakuzu shook him, partly to figure out if it was a *Henge*, though mostly to shut him up.

"No, you aren't asking any questions here, whoever-the-fuck-you-are. Now, what the hell is going on here?!" He looked sharply to Deidara.

"...You wouldn't believe me if I told you, yeah." he deadpanned, crossing his arms sulkily. He was avoiding looking at his partner like it would poison him, and he seemed a little sad or something. Kakuzu ground his teeth together, wondering what was *with* this younger generation.

"You, then." He turned to Hinata, who jumped guiltily.

"U-Um... Yutaka w-was dead, but his spirit, ah, manages to live on through chakra. In the ground. He took over Sasori's body, and um... he's fighting us. We're out of chakra and clay, and we can't do much more against him..." she left off pitifully, poking her fingers together.

"I thought Itachi broke you of that habit." he said critically, nodding towards her hands. She went red and hid her hands behind her. "So, this chakra network... you've been blowing it up, eh?" Kakuzu looked around at the assorted craters, skeptical of the whole story. Still, it wasn't like he had been there, and he didn't particularly *care*.

"Let me go, you Akatsuki punk!" The voice, presumably Yutaka, snarled through Sasori.

"And let me guess. You and the blonde fairy boy wouldn't *hurt* Sasori. ...Well, Yutaka-chan, I have no such problem." Kakuzu smiled beneath his mask, giving the redhead a toss with his great strength. Sasori went flying, just as Hidan showed up, panting and still lugging the Jinchuuriki around. The immortal watched the puppeteer land in a snowdrift on the other side of a ruined house. "Okay, so what is really going on?"

"No, if we could just get a little help, then we'll have it all under control," the Hyuuga beamed. She suddenly went so bright it almost hurt to look at her. "If-If you could just please, um, attack the ground where I say..."

Hinata seemed perfectly content to draw lines in the snow in no particular pattern, instructing Kakuzu to carve holes into the ground to release the chakra stored in the land. Hidan offered the occasional curse as commentary, watching disinterestedly. Deidara wandered off somewhere, presumably to find his partner. Yet again, the mercenary didn't particularly care. He had a feeling that the summary he'd gotten was edited, but it wasn't his place to snoop. Some of the younger members might not value that personality trait very well, but at least Kakuzu knew how to mind his own business. (Unless it concerned Hidan.)

The sun rose over the eastern mountains, setting the snow ablaze in color. It wasn't long before the Hyuuga deemed the chakra network completely destroyed, and while it seemed to Kakuzu to be a monumental waste of chakra, he had to admit that using assorted very dangerous jutsu on the ground was a great stress relief. Particularly after traveling with Hidan for god-knows-how-many-kilometers and hearing him bitch about every little thing.

Deidara came back, half-dragging, half-carrying a semiconscious Sasori. The blonde had the closest thing to a soft smile he'd ever seen, and the groggy puppeteer gave them both a wave of greeting. "You look like shit. Where's the money?" Kakuzu asked in response.

It came to the point where Sasori, who was in no condition to head back to Kumogakure, was going to be escorted back to Ame by Kakuzu. (The Nibi, who had woken up once and had been knocked back out, was also going to be brought back by the miser.) Deidara, Hidan and Hinata were to

infiltrate the Cloud and retrieve Yutaka's savings, by whatever means necessary. The Jashinist looked rather pleased by that stipulation.

As they were leaving, Sasori, who was leaning on Kakuzu, muttered, "That boy is no ninja."

"No, kids of this generation just aren't what they used to be. They need a war or two to toughen them up." Kakuzu replied dismissively. "Soon we'll probably get one."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara obviously has some abandonment issues. The mission wraps up in an unexpected way as the Cloud goes under siege! The Raikage himself appears, but can two exhausted Akatsuki face up to him?

Bloody Snow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata was more than a little nervous about entering Kumogakure. Not only was it a foreign ninja village, and not only it was an enemy ninja village, but the Cloud and the Leaf hadn't had the best relations in the past.

Not that she actually remembered most of it, but almost twelve years ago, she had nearly been kidnapped by Kumo-nin. Neji's father had died as a result. Needless to say, that was more than what was needed to make her nervous. The Cloud were incredibly jealous of the Byakugan, and no doubt they'd recognize a Hyuuga in a split second.

As an extra precaution, she cast the ignore me jutsu over herself and her companions.

Deidara seemed to be complaining as much as Hidan usually did, and the Jashinist didn't look amused at the switched roles. Hinata had been noticing that lately anything having to do with Sasori was putting the blonde on edge, but of course, this whole mission had been a disaster, so she didn't blame him. Instead, the Hyuuga heiress just shushed him, pulling her hood over her head for an extra measure. With the genjutsu in place, they shouldn't be spotted. Deidara was a complete unknown to Kumogakure, and she highly doubted that they would be able to spot a Hyuuga through the genjutsu, even if they had been searching for twelve years. Hidan was likewise covered, and after stealing a peek at his ancient, rather strange hitai-ate, she could say that he wasn't a Cloud ninja, either.

Once inside the gates, however, things rapidly went downhill. "We don't know who Kito is!" she whispered.

"Who the fuck is—"

"Sasori-danna's spy, yeah!" Deidara interrupted, elbowing him in the side to shut him up. Hidan glared at him but didn't retaliate. "He's supposed to be getting us the money!"

"Oh, right, what-the-fuck-ever. Like I give a shit. This kind of job is Kakuzu's, not mine. I didn't join this damn group to collect fuckin' *money*." Hidan hissed with a roll of his eyes.

"Well you two are just impossible! Did you honestly expect the Akatsuki to be *perfect*?" Hinata asked exasperatedly. "Now *please*, be quiet! My *houtteoko onore* will stop people from looking at us, but not hearing...!"

The two shinobi grumbled some sort of agreement and crossed their arms, sulking. She activated her Byakugan again, looking around uneasily. The chakra stung her eyes a little, but she knew she couldn't keep it up. Soon she would be out of chakra, anyway. Hopefully the ignore me jutsu would hold out until they found Sasori's spy.

Unfortunately, Hidan had just been in the Cloud a sparse few hours ago. Many people were still buzzing about it, even the ANBU. The first time she heard his name, she hastily jumped into the nearest alleyway, dragging Hidan with her. The genjutsu wouldn't hold up if people were thinking about him, and if he was exposed, then she and Deidara would be as well. They needed a new plan of action.

"You know... we could always act like *ninjas*. Stealthy and shit," he shrugged nonchalantly. "I

don't fucking care. They're too damn scared of the Akatsuki to do anything." As if to prove his point, Hidan strutted arrogantly back out into the open street, tossing his scythe from one hand to the other, bored. Civilians just walked around him, completely unaware of the sadistic, bloodthirsty murderer not a yard from them. "See?"

That was when the hoard of ANBU and jounin jumped down from the nearest roof, landing on him in a dog pile. Hinata gave a little scream, and Deidara jumped, looking startled at the sudden surge in masked personnel. Several sets of eyes turned to them, but aside from being discovered and dispelling the genjutsu, their attention was rapidly turned back to Hidan, who had gotten out from under them and was hacking madly away with his sickle.

"Yeah, you sure proved us wrong, yeah!" Deidara jumped into the fray with a shout, stabbing the first ANBU he met with a kunai. The man swore and tried to return the gesture, only narrowly missing. Hinata just watched for a brief moment, before joining herself.

Then she remembered that her chakra was depleted.

Her first *Juuken* strikes were successful, actually taking down a hawk-masked man. And while she was feeling triumphant at her first ANBU casualty, her body was screaming at her to run for it. No more gentle fist or genjutsu for her. By the time she realized this, another shinobi was on her, and she could only pull out a handful of shuriken and throw them at him.

The Hyuuga heiress was reduced to raw taijutsu and weapons. It was a little shaming, truth be told.

The man, pulling stars out of his chest, stared at her. "...She's a Hyuuga!" he finally shouted, and Hinata felt as if she had just been given the death sentence. The kunoichi ran for the relative safety of the two Akatsuki members. Hidan and Deidara were holding their own, but albeit just barely. Deidara looked like he ran out of his clay, and was using an assortment of weapons and earth-based jutsu to keep the ANBU away. Hidan, as always, was just swinging his scythe.

Before Hinata could reach them, the Iwa-nin went down. He was pinned to the ground by a pair of ANBU, one of them missing half a mask and his arm guards. She tried to kick one of them, but she didn't have the weight or muscle to back it up, and the man just caught her ankle. "You're not wearing the uniform—Oh, such pretty eyes you have. Raikage-sama will be pleased..." He hoisted her upside-down by the ankle, and she just realized how tall the man was.

"Hey! Let me go, you bloody fucking damn heathen bastard ninja-wannabes! Jashin-sama will feast on your godless souls!" She couldn't see him, but she gathered that Hidan had been subdued as well. It was sort of sad, really. Two and a half Akatsuki members taken down in a matter of minutes. (True, they were exhausted, but *still*.)

"Wasn't this the man who took Yugito?" Someone asked. Hinata tried to activate her Byakugan to see how many there were, but the sight wouldn't come. She was officially out of chakra.

"Yeah, I think so. What are you doing, coming back here? We already gave you that demon!"

"I've come to sacrifice your souls to Jashin-sama!" Hidan howled, and there was a metallic clatter as his scythe was probably taken from him.

They were screwed.

Once, many years ago, on a snowy December night, the princess had almost been kidnapped. The king had stopped such an action, but war very nearly erupted. The neighboring kingdom, the kingdom of the clouds and lightning, demanded that compensation was to be paid for the lying 'knight' who had been killed. The princess never remembered the event, but it had been told to her several times, and to always stay away from the warriors from the clouds.

The king had lost his brother as a result of the tragedy. It had divided her kingdom for quite some time, but time was just healing the wounds when the princess was kidnapped again, by her dragon.

And now here the poor princess was, caught for real by the people of the clouds. They wanted her for her precious bloodline, the royalty of the leaves. More importantly, her eyes. Her uncle had died protecting those eyes, and now she was about to give them up, willing or not.

And who knew what would happen to her dragons.

-.-.-

Hinata was blindfolded, tied up, and thrown into what she presumed was a cell. Normally she could see through the blindfold, but she also felt the telltale buzz of chakra-draining shackles. Even if she'd had the energy before, she didn't now. Her eyes were normal, and useless, again.

But instead of feeling sorry for herself, panic was driving her to try to escape. Ninja didn't give up, no matter the situation, right? Besides, if she stayed here, she would most likely get her eyes cut out. That didn't sound very fun.

Logically, they would place Deidara and Hidan as far away as possible from each other. Add her into the mix, meaning she was probably in the middle of the compound, with Hidan at one end and Deidara at the other. She didn't know how large the prison was, but it should be fairly large. Kumogakure was one of the five great shinobi villages, after all.

Still, it was a start.

Hinata struggled to stand up—it's a harder feat than it looks without the use of hands—and leaned against the nearest wall for support. She set her forehead against the cool concrete, trying to rub the blindfold off. After scraping her cheeks and forehead quite a bit, she succeeded in regaining her normal sight, and used the sudden advantage to take in her surroundings. Three walls of concrete, no window, and a wall of metal bars leading out into a massive middle chamber.

She seemed to be several stories up, if the fact that she couldn't see the ground floor was anything to go by. No other prisoners were in her range of sight, across the vast chamber or not. It was highly possible that Deidara and Hidan were on separate floors, though her reasoning before probably still held firm. One would be on the top floor, and the other would be below her, to separate them.

She could always yell and see if one of them replied, so she could at least gauge their positions, but that would bring guards. Hinata didn't need that right now.

Her mind was oddly clear of panic or desperation, working with a machinelike efficiency. The Hyuuga sat back down, kicking her boots off. Like most ninja, there were several basic things

hidden in the soles, though she couldn't tell if they were removed or not. Mostly she needed the small blade, but the soldier pill would come in handy, too.

Luck was not with her, however. The blade was gone, and with it, so were her chances of escaping the ropes tying her. It looked like the soldier pill was still there, as well as a thin wire meant for killing someone. She couldn't use either of them quite yet.

Hinata crossed her legs, closing her eyes to think. Someone yelling downstairs was making it progressively harder to think, though. She squeezed her eyes shut harder, trying to block it out. Eventually, however, the shouting was getting louder, and she began to pick out words. Something about a prisoner escaping. She immediately held out the small hope that it was either one of her comrades, but it was highly unlikely. Still, at least it would be distracting the guards from her cell.

Her best bet was probably to eat the soldier pill now and try to break out of the shackles before they drained the boost of chakra. If she could do that, she could easily cut her way out of the ropes binding her and make it out. Then she could find Deidara—or Hidan—and free him. Or she could just release every prisoner she came across and hope for a mass revolt.

Below, the yelling was still increasing in volume. The sound of boots on the concrete floor was nearing her, so Hinata hastily put her boots back on, as to not arouse suspicion. "...have to move her, else Raikage-sama will throw a fit! We can afford to lose other prisoners, but not a Hyuuga!" she heard, and her eyes went wide.

She hastily bent down to retrieve her soldier pill, keeping it under her tongue until the proper moment.

Two guards ran into sight, looking hassled. They didn't appear surprised at her lack of blindfold. One of them made a seal, and the door to the cell popped open. The other one walked cautiously in, hauling her up to her feet by the ropes binding her. Hinata let them drag her out into the hallway, watching her surroundings intently.

Below her, the shouting seemed to be getting closer, and there were more voices than before. The guards seemed nervous about it, but they absolutely froze when all noise from downstairs stopped. It was deadly quiet below, and that couldn't mean anything good.

Suddenly, a pillar of flame shot up from floors below with a roar, up through the empty space between sides of the prison. Screaming soon started up again, this time more fervent than the last. Hinata's two guards looked at each other. "You take the Hyuuga and go to the bunker. I'll go see what's going on."

Hinata waited until the other was out of sight before crunching down on the soldier pill. With the sudden rush of energy, she darted out of the guard's grasp, then backtracked and ran into him. He fell over the edge and fell down the space, hitting the concrete below with a distant crunch. She winced in sympathy, but didn't have time for anything else. The boost of chakra was rapidly disappearing with the chakra shackles, and she needed to get them off *now*.

After pulling, she found that she wasn't going to get them off herself. She looked around wildly, and finally spotted a prisoner who didn't have his hands tied. He looked tired, almost bored. "Here! I-I'll set you free if you can get these off, quickly!" she called, running up to the cell. He looked up at her, cocked his head to the side, and slowly nodded.

Deidara had been close to the ground floor when the riot started. Some prisoner had managed to escape, and after a brief tussle with a few guards and a shouting match, he had started to release more prisoners. Most of them were subdued, but a growing excitement was starting to pervade the prison. More and more prisoners were released, and after about ten minutes, the riot reached the second floor. (Deidara was on the third, as far as he knew.)

He had already gotten untied, and was pacing his cell, bound only by chakra shackles. Gods, those things were annoying. He was almost drained of all of his chakra. Hopefully, the escapees would reach the third floor before they were killed or restrained, and if they freed him... then oh boy, all hell would break loose. He'd show *them* what it meant to imprison Akatsuki and his princess!

That was, if he got out in time. As it stood, he probably couldn't get out alone without getting the shackles off first, and that was looking to be impossible. Deidara jumped when there was a rush of fire just outside his cell door, and he felt the heat singe his already tattered uniform. The massive attack caught him off guard, especially since the only ninja he knew of that could create that size *Katon* was Kakuzu. A moment later, some guy fell down from one of the top stories, landing on the concrete with a shrill scream.

Deidara grinned to himself. This riot wasn't going to end anytime soon, unless the Raikage himself was called in. Even then, as he heard cell doors clink on his own floor, the man would have his hands full.

One of the escaped prisoners, a painfully thin kunoichi, paused at his cell door. Her eyes were conspicuously glued to his cloak. "Hurry up and let me out of here, yeah! You guys aren't going to get out of the prison alive unless you have a bigger distraction, and I'd say freeing an Akatsuki member would do it!"

She let him free without another word, and hurried onto the next prisoner. Deidara jumped out of the cell, landing deftly on the railing, looking down at the bloodbath below. Bodies and blood littered the cement, and the fighting seemed to be moving up with the floors. ANBU were just now starting to get called in, but the shinobi prisoners were releasing others on higher levels, jumping from floor to floor. They couldn't catch up with the sheer numbers that were being released.

Deidara jumped up onto the next floor, checking around for any sign of the dark-haired girl or the immortal. None. Logic stated that they'd be far away from him, but how far he didn't know. But he knew that he'd only find them by searching, if they were already free themselves.

As he jumped from floor to floor, he noticed that his uniform was getting strange looks. Usually fearful, but a lot of them looked at him in awe. It was a little strange, being looked at like that, but he shrugged it off and continued his search. Below, the shouting was increasing, and more and more jutsus were being thrown every which way. Maybe there were more ninja in this prison than he had thought.

Finally, after nearly ten floors up, he spotted the tell-tale white coat and dark hair of the Hyuuga. She turned a corner before he could call out, however, but he noticed that she had gotten her shackles off. He looked down at his own, wondering how. His chakra was nearly shot because of them, and while without clay he didn't use much chakra, anyway, he felt a little miffed at it being stolen from him.

"Can anyone get this off of me, yeah?!" he shouted, holding his hands up in the air. Most of the people on this floor were still in their cells, and looked up with as much excitement as one could muster in a prison.

An old man in a cell across the gap raised his hand, yelling back in a hoarse voice, "I could, boy. If you free me and my wife, I'll take them off for you." Deidara nodded, and jumped across the gap to land in front of the iron bars. He held out his hands, and with surprisingly deft hands for his age, the old man soon had them clattering to the floor.

After several minutes of trying, Deidara finally figured out a way to open the door without his clay. The old couple fled from the scene, and the Iwa-nin was finally free to look for his companions again. He searched the rest of the floor, but the kunoichi was nowhere to be found.

Rising up another floor, he found her and Hidan, both trying to open the immortal's door. "Deidara-kun! You're free already?" she asked, almost in surprise. "How did you get your cuffs off?"

"I was on one of the lower floors, yeah. And—"

"You two quick your babbling and let me out!" Hidan broke in irritably, kicking at the cell door. "I'd still like to get these damn things off this century!"

"O-Okay, hold on..." the white-eyed girl returned back to trying to pick the lock. There was one click, then two, and then a third. "I think just a little more..."

"Hurry it up!"

"I've never picked a cell lock before!" she cried in exasperation, rolling her eyes. "J-Just wait a *minute*..."

Just before the lock clicked open, someone else jumped up onto the railing, just behind them. Deidara felt the air crackle with static electricity, and he only had time to turn as an electric attack strikingly similar to Sasuke's *Chidori* shot forward and grabbed the Hyuuga. She opened her mouth in a silent scream for only a moment before she went limp.

She was in her attacker's arms before Deidara could do so much more than blink. The Iwa-nin turned in shock, feeling ready to kill whoever had just tried that.

The man had a Kumo hitai-ate tied around his neck loosely, but of course he had to be a Cloud ninja. He propped the Hyuuga up on his knee, brushing back her bangs to look at her forehead. "Hmm... yep, no annoying seal," he said with some satisfaction. For good measure, he checked her eyes, just to make sure. The man's golden eyes turned to regard the two Akatsuki members as he smirked. "This is definitely a main house Hyuuga."

"Who the fuck are you supposed to be?!" Hidan demanded, though he looked more annoyed that she hadn't unlocked his cage before going unconscious.

The man looked affronted. "I know who you two are, but you do not have knowledge of me? I see that the Akatsuki isn't quite as knowledgeable as they'd like to seem." He ran a hand through his spiked black hair, giving them a mock sigh. Deidara didn't know who this joker was supposed to be, but he was mighty arrogant to pull this off in front of two Akatsuki members. Reopening his strikingly bright eyes, he gave them a sly smile. "I'm the Raikage, the leader of Kumogakure. I figure that *that* position would at least be enough to merit a cursory knowledge within the famous Akatsuki."

That stunned both men. Deidara hadn't actually been wishing for the Raikage here, though the man was much younger than he would have thought. It caught him severely off guard. He hadn't been expecting to fight anyone of that rank, especially with little chakra and no clay! Still, the Iwa-nin sunk into a fighting stance, narrowing his eyes.

The Raikage looked amused. "Do you *really* think I'd fight you? As far as I'm concerned, I owe the Akatsuki a large debt. You took care of Yugito for us and had the civility to come back and hand us one of the very things we've been trying to get our hands on for decades." He smiled disarmingly. "As far as I'm concerned, Kumogakure is an ally of Ame's now."

"We don't want any of that bullshit!" Hidan shouted, rattling the bars of the cell. "Let us out of here and we'll see how *thankful* you are, you heathen—"

"Just give us Bya-chan back, yeah, and we won't have to fight you!" Deidara interrupted with a snarl.

"Bya-chan'...?" If possible, he looked even more amused by the nickname. "Short for 'Byakugan', I presume...?" When neither of them answered, he continued with the same charming smile plastered on his face. "I don't want to fight either of you, either. Why ruin our newfound alliance, hm?"

"Let her *go*!"

"And let me out of here!" Hidan added.

The Raikage tilted his head, making a sign with one hand. The door opened, and Hidan, who had been leaning on it, tumbled out. "You two are free to go. I'll order my men not to harm either of you. Just please, don't ruin our prison every time you wish to give the Cloud a gift, okay?" He winked at them both, hugging the unconscious kunoichi warmly. "Once again, I thank the Akatsuki."

Deidara lunged for him, but he disappeared in a puff of smoke, and he nearly went over the edge. Hidan hauled him back up by the back of the cloak, raising an eyebrow. "That... could have gone better, eh?" The blonde just pushed him away, jumping over the edge to the next floor below. The Jashinist followed, persistent. "What, you're going to go *save* her? You ain't got any clay or fucking chakra. It's hard to take down a Kage *normally*. You're going to get yourself slaughtered."

"I don't see *you* doing anything, yeah." he replied hotly, vaulting onto the next floor. "Do you *really* want to face Itachi when he hears that his student was killed?"

Hidan thought a long time before answering. "...I don't think so. But it'd be fun to see you get killed by him for it." He turned and fixed him with a glare that shut the immortal up, at least for a few minutes. "So. You're going to go lay siege on the Raikage's tower. When you have no clay. Or chakra. Or back-up."

"That's what *you* are, aren't you, yeah?" he asked, raising his visible eyebrow. Hidan didn't seem pleased at his assigned role, at least not until Deidara added, "Think of what your god would say if you sacrificed a *Kage*."

Hidan gleefully followed him from then on.

The pair continued jumping down from floor to floor, until they decided to just jump from the third. Unfortunately, they landed on someone quite unexpected.

"Waaaaaaah, Zetsu-san, Zetsu-san, why is Tobi being attacked from above—oh, hi, Deidara-san!" Deidara pushed himself off of Tobi, who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere along with his partner. Tobi, however, wrapped his arms around the blonde's waist, crying, "Ohhhh, yay, Deidara-san is okay! We thought that you were dead!"

"What? Why, yeah?" Deidara pried himself away from the masked ninja, gasping for breath. Zetsu

shoved Hidan away from him, dusting himself off.

"We met up with Kakuzu and Sasori about an hour ago. Sasori was in pretty rough shape, and Kakuzu just ordered us to find you," his white half said calmly, doing a once-over of them. "You seem fine to me." His black half added, "*I mean, they were quite worried that you two would die and they'd have to get more annoying partners.*"

"Psh, Kakuzu would be *hoping* I would die." Hidan replied sourly, crossing his arms.

Tobi tackled him, likewise telling him just how much he was glad he was still alive. Zetsu sighed, and asked, "...Where's Hinata? I thought she went everywhere with you."

"The Raikage just took her, yeah. Hey, do you have any soldier pills?" Deidara asked, perking up. The Grass shinobi shook his head. "Damn, yeah."

"*Are you thinking about fighting the Raikage? First the Tsuchikage, then the Kazekage... you like fighting leaders, don't you?*" The black side grinned viciously at him. The blonde just shrugged. "*I've heard he's a master of electrical jutsu. Won't that have a negative impact on your earth-based jutsu?*"

"Well, it would, if I had any clay left... yeah..." he sighed, running his hand through his bangs.

"Hey, Tobi, get off of Hidan. He's helping me take down the Raikage."

Obediently he let go, flouncing back over to the pair. Hidan followed him, trying to restore oxygen to his brain. "You're going to fight the Raikage? Can Tobi come too? Tobi's a good boy, Tobi can fight!"

Zetsu cocked his split-colored head, raising an eyebrow. "Hmm... yes, I think that would work. Leader-sama would surely appreciate that. Aren't you supposed to be getting the money, though?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

"I'll get the money. You take Tobi and go fight the Raikage." After a beat, he added, "*Just save the corpse for me.*"

"Why are we going to be fighting Raikage-san?" Tobi asked eagerly, clasping his hands together. Deidara rolled his eyes at his enthusiasm.

"Because he took Bya-chan for her Byakugan, yeah. Evidently the Cloud has been wanting it for quite awhile."

"Poor Hinata-san..."

-.-.-

Hinata awoke with the realization that she was laying down, on something sort of soft. Her last conscious memory being standing up in a prison of cement and iron, she knew that something had happened. Her body felt a little numb and tingly, and it triggered the recall of being zapped by some unknown assailant.

Again, she was blindfolded, though *why* she didn't really get. She still had some chakra from the

soldier pill, and with it, she activated her Byakugan. There was a body sitting in a chair on the other side of the room, but aside from that they seemed to be alone. The room was circular and large, almost reminding her of the Hokage's office in Konoha.

The person sitting down stood up, and walked over to her. Hinata hastily turned off the Byakugan, feigning sleep once more. "Oh, come now..." a soft, almost charming voice purred, and she sensed him kneel by her. "I think I know whether or not a ninja is sleeping. You're insulting me, Hyuuga-sama..."

It had been quite some time since someone had last called her that. Hinata gave up the façade, and quietly asked, "Who are you?"

"Your host." That didn't answer her question, but perhaps it was for the best. His voice was lulling, almost hypnotic. She checked to see if it was genjutsu, but it wasn't. She slowly sat up, feeling her way to the arm of the couch, as if she couldn't see.

"...Where's Deidara-kun?" she asked, still keeping her voice low. She didn't like this situation, but she needed more information. There wasn't much she could do otherwise.

"The possessive blonde?" She hadn't ever pictured Deidara as 'possessive', but now that this man mentioned it... he was a little. Protective was more like it, though. "Most likely halfway back to Amegakure by now," he purred in her ear, patting her on the head. Hinata sucked in her lips, completely unwilling to believe such a thing. Deidara wouldn't ever leave her freely, even if it *was* the smart thing to do.

...Right?

She pushed her remaining stores of chakra into her eyes, expanding her sight range as far as she could, looking for her telltale partner. Hopefully he wouldn't be strutting out the gates.

But instead, a shock met her Byakugan. Three rather familiar chakras were standing at the base of the tower she was in, evidently looking for a way in. She focused on them, discovering not only Deidara and Hidan, but shockingly *Tobi* as well. When had *he* arrived?

Unfortunately, Hinata hadn't excelled in covering up her emotions in the academy. She saw the man beside her smirk, raising an eyebrow. Her mind grappled for some way out of this, but it seemed fortune returned when he asked, "See your precious blonde friend at the gates? Or perhaps he's already left the village?"

He was overestimating her because of her eyes. It wasn't something she encountered daily, but the Hyuuga was going to take what she could get at this point. Faking a small, sad whimper, she turned her head away from him, as if trying not to cry. She didn't say anything, and the man patted her on the head again, running his fingers through her shoulder-length hair.

"Oh, you *poor* thing. Abandoned and in a foreign village. Such a tragedy," he cooed, tucking her hair behind her ear. "But don't worry now, Hyuuga-sama. Kumogakure knows how to treat its guests."

Below, her rescue team had decided to storm the front door. Hinata felt her blindfold untie itself, falling harmlessly into her lap. She was suddenly looking into the startling yellow eyes of her captor, thanking the gods that she could stare flatly back while keeping her focus floors below.

"Such beautiful eyes. I bet not many Leaf ninja tell you that, hmm?" Hinata just shook her head, trying her best to look confused and scared. This man's heartbeat was rather slow, and if she hadn't

been staring at him, she would have said he was asleep. He was *that* relaxed. He had no idea of the danger that was now climbing the stairs to the second floor.

Unfortunately, the man appeared to be no ordinary ninja.

Still as relaxed as ever, he traced his hand down her cheek, cupping her chin. With his other hand, he had a kunai pressing against her temple in a flash. "I *like* your eyes, Hyuuga-sama. I think I like them a little too much. You see, *I* want them. And your little rescue team downstairs can't stop me if I've already gotten them by the time they arrive, hmm?"

The kunai pressed into her temple, a small bead of blood running down the blade. Hinata fought to keep her heart under control, but her eyes wide. She wasn't going to show fear to this man just because he threatened her with a knife! If she could stall—or even fight—for just a few minutes, he couldn't stand up to the combined power of three Akatsuki members. *No one* could stand up to that power.

Hinata gingerly tried to move her head, but he held her firm. She stared into his eyes, wishing that she could cast genjutsu without hand signs like Itachi could. The man smiled lazily, letting his eyelids droop, giving him a drugged expression. He was a little weird, she decided offhandedly.

The heiress dropped down into a laying position, bringing her feet up to kick the man in the stomach. He either let her do it or hadn't been expecting it, and he stumbled back, clutching his stomach and the lone kunai. She escaped with only a scratch down her cheek. Hinata stared at him, slowly getting back up, looking around for some sort of weapon to use. If he was so keen on the Byakugan, then he undoubtedly knew about the *Juuken*. But at the moment, it was the only route available to her.

She sunk into the familiar stance, wishing she had practiced more during her stay in Amegakure. When—if—she ever made it back, that was going to the top of her list to do. The man stood up, twirling the kunai around his fingers skillfully, cocking his head in her direction. "Do you really think... that the gentle fist style will work on me?" he asked, rather arrogantly.

"Yes." she replied with a bob of her head.

With a rue grin, he charged her, exchanging the kunai knife for his fist. She ducked under it easily, but not the knee that came up to meet her chin a second later. Her teeth clicked together and her vision grew blurry for a moment, and while she was trying to regain her balance, the man somehow got behind her and grabbed a fistful of her dark hair. He hauled her up by it, flipping her around and slamming her into the hard floor on her stomach.

He was sitting on her before she could do so much as blink.

"That was quite the learning experience, wouldn't you say, Hyuuga-sama?" he drawled, twirling the kunai in his hand again. She couldn't reply, as he was rapidly cutting off her oxygen supply. He slowly draped his arm over the top of her head, resting his elbow on her, the point of the blade coming dangerously close to her face.

She heard the door slam open just as the kunai slid under her chin, forcing itself into her neck.

It was a bit of a slap in the face, Deidara had to admit. He was totally alright with getting himself hurt. It happened regularly, in fact. Ninja got hurt all the time, right?

Seeing Sasori coughing up blood was a little scary. So was him shouting for his partner to kill him. But Sasori was a ninja, and a veteran one at that. He was used to injuries just as well. And wounds on *other* shinobi were just fine.

But seeing a green, hardly-chuunin kunoichi, who he had kept safely under his wing for nearly a year, take a kunai to the throat was a bit of a wake-up call. It was like... she was a doll, or something, and an incredibly fragile one at that. Deidara hadn't expected her to get injured, really, or even spill a drop of blood. Sure, she had a penchant for getting herself kidnapped, but she always came out unscathed. There was something angelic about her that stopped people from harming her.

Evidently this man had no such reserve.

"Shit, man," Deidara heard Hidan say, somewhere behind him. The Raikage smoothly got up from his previous position on the kunoichi, yanking out the kunai just as quickly. He held it up to inspect, licking the blood off of the blade with a small grin.

"Hinata-chan..." Tobi whimpered, peering over Deidara's shoulder. Evidently they'd both held the same ideals about her.

The kunoichi coughed, and got up onto her knees. She was down on all fours just a moment later, still coughing violently, blood pouring from her neck and mouth. Deidara just watched, eyes wide. His shinobi training told him that it was a shallow cut, and the greatest immediate risk was drowning in her own blood. But blood loss would soon catch up and force her unconscious. It was a downhill slide from there.

In short, stop the blood. *Now*.

She said something, but the blood garbled her words and made them inaudible. She spat a mouthful of blood out, still hacking up a lung—and her esophagus—and there was soon a small puddle of blood underneath her hands.

The Raikage, the kunai still stuck in his mouth, smiled. He reached down languidly, grabbed the back of her jacket, and hauled her to her feet. Deidara took a step forward, unconsciously reaching out for her—an upright position would only force the blood down her throat and speed up the process. The Hyuuga tried to get away, but her struggles were weak and almost frightened, and she continued to try to get the blood out of her throat.

"Take a step closer and I'll finish her off. Without the seal on her pretty little forehead, she can die at any time and I can take her Byakugan at my leisure," the man stated emotionlessly, all traces of his prior cheerful disposition gone. In his grasp, her coughing was beginning to subside and instead her breaths were coming out in gargles, blood still dripping down her chin and neck. The front of her jacket was just beginning to absorb it, dying it red.

Deidara felt like he'd throw up. "Jashin-sama help *her* soul." Hidan said, almost dismissively. "What the fuck do you *want*, anyway, you sick bastard?!"

"I want the Byakugan. I have told you this before, Akatsuki-san. I also said that you were free to go." The Raikage cast a cursory glance towards Tobi, evidently writing him off because of his bright orange mask and single eyehole.

"...Let... her... *go*." Deidara said, finally finding his voice. It came out a bit harsher than he

wanted, and that was saying something. "I said, let her go."

Her mouth was moving wordlessly, and now it sounded like she wasn't breathing at all. She was completely limp in the Kumo-nin's grasp, occasionally jerking as if coughing. Deidara wanted to kill that *manso* bad right then. The last time he had felt this much murderous intent was in Iwa, when he was betrayed. Another Kage was going to die soon.

"She isn't *yours*." The teasing smile was back, and he positioned her so she was half-leaning, half-laying in his arms. "This Hyuuga is *mine*." Her blood was dripping down onto his hands. *Her* blood. Deidara clenched his fists. God, if he was a Jinchuuriki right now, he'd be growing fangs and a few tails. If he'd had clay right then, he wouldn't even bother using it. He wanted to feel this man's bones break beneath his fingers. He didn't deserve to become art.

The wounded kunoichi turned, coughing up yet *more* blood. She was barely conscious at this point. Her head lulled limply on her shoulder, and her eyes were beginning to glaze over. She was dying, for real. She turned slightly, looking at Deidara with flat, white eyes. Her lips moved, making no sound, mouthing only a single word. '*Deidara...*'

The Iwa-nin lunged forward, too fast for either Tobi or Hidan to restrain him. In a fluid move, just as fast, the Raikage dropped the girl, formed his electric jutsu, and punched him in the stomach. He felt his body tingle all over and lost feeling in his limbs, barely landing back on his feet. Deidara swayed on his feet for a moment, then shook his head to clear himself. It would take more than *that* to bring him down! "Nice... try, yeah." he spat, pulling back his arm for his own punch.

"You're in a horrible match-up. An Iwa-nin against a Kumo-nin? It's laughable." the man replied, barely missing the strike and the following kick. Deidara managed to elbow him in the shoulder, and took the opportunity to kick him in the stomach. The Raikage went flying into one of the walls, cracking it. Deidara went to follow, but a hand on his shoulder restrained him.

"You're too weak to fight, Deidara-san!" Tobi scolded, shaking his finger. "You're only getting angry and that's not good! Totally uncool!"

"What?! Like hell I'm going to let that man live—"

"Tobi is a good boy, so I'm going to make a deal with Deidara-san." The masked ninja chirped perkily. The blonde could have smashed his face in. How *dare* he act like this, considering the circumstances! "Hinata-chan needs medical attention. You and Hidan-san take care of her, and I'll kill Raikage-san."

"I'm not going to—"

"*Look.*" Tobi snarled, his voice suddenly pitching an octave lower. "She is going to *die* without some healing jutsu. You are in *no shape* to fight right now." The change nearly scared Deidara, especially since the taller man had picked him up by the front of the shirt to make his point.

"...Yeah."

At that point, however, the Raikage had picked himself back up. He had started his jutsu yet again, and Deidara blinked in surprise when he found the Cloud ninja's fist crackling with energy, thrust entirely through Tobi's chest. The masked ninja dropped Deidara, his shoulders drooping slowly.

The Raikage grinned viciously, yanking his arm out and sticking his tongue out at Deidara. "Now, then—"

"You know, that was totally lame, Raikage-sama! Tobi and Deidara-san were having a

conversation." Tobi said, his voice once again chipper as always. Deidara was a little amazed that he could talk after an injury like that, but the Hyuuga took precedence. He backed away from the two, practically flying over to where the girl lay in her own blood. Her chest wasn't moving, and her face was whiter than her eyes. Hidan was kneeling over her, his rosary in his hands, muttering something.

"What are you doing?!"

"Praying for her soul to Jashin-sama. She wasn't the greatest Jashinist, but he ought to have mercy on her soul." the immortal said, surprisingly serious. Deidara could have smacked him.

"*She. Isn't. Dead. Yet.*" he snarled, looking down at her. All signs pointed to his incorrectness. He knew only basic medic jutsu, but he thought he could heal the cut in her neck. He couldn't remove blood from lungs, though. He pressed his hands over her throat, the tongues licking at the still wet blood experimentally. The open wound healed, albeit sloppily.

She didn't move.

"...Bya-chan...?"

"...And Jashin-sama please have mercy on your convert's soul. Take her into your nirvana, and keep her sheltered from all other heathen deities. Keep her with you for all eternity until the final judgment, when all of your loyal subjects come together. She died an honorable, scarlet death. I, your most trusted apostle, hereby cast her soul into your almighty hands, Jashin-sama."

"Bya-chan?" Deidara repeated, gently grabbing her shoulders. He lifted her up, but she was limp in his arms. "...Bya... chan..." He brought her face up to his, looking at the stark white skin contrasting with her crimson chin. He couldn't feel her breathing. "...Hinata?"

Deidara glanced over his shoulder. Tobi had just single-handedly defeated the Raikage, but was only pulling his bloody hands from the corpse as the blonde looked over. He cocked his head, striding over, wiping his gloved hands on his cloak. "...Does Hidan-san know any medical jutsu?"

"I'm a killer, not a healer, kid." he replied snappishly, still praying mutely over her.

"Tobi must be a bad boy; I don't know any medical jutsu, either..." he sighed, running his hand through his messy hair. "Ohh, but Hinata-chan can't die. Tobi will go get Zetsu-san!" Tobi disappeared as quickly as if he had teleported.

Hidan waited a beat, and then got up, inspecting the Raikage's body. "Hmm... not dead yet... stubborn little jackass..." he murmured. Deidara ignored him, still staring in horror at the girl in his arms. He set her gingerly back down, unzipping her jacket, and placed his ear against her chest. A heartbeat, that was all he was asking for. A single, audible heartbeat. "Jashin-sama will be in a better mood to accept a convert's soul if he has a sacrifice." Hidan's announcement fell onto deaf ears.

There was silence, except for the rustle of Hidan's cloak as he moved about. He seemed nonchalant about the entire thing. Deidara shut his eyes tightly, praying to any gods out there—even Jashin—that he would hear the beat of a dead kunoichi's heart.

--.-

Zetsu had been quite merrily (which was saying something, considering how his sides fought) holding up the nearest bank for Yutaka's money. He didn't care *where* the money came from, as long as he got the right amount. Yutaka probably hadn't even gone to this bank, but whatever. The civilians and lower-ranked ninja shrank back in fear as he cheerfully gathered up the money in his bag.

"*And if any of you so much as dare to breathe, I'll eat you alive.*" the dark side of him threatened happily, swinging the bag over his shoulder as he turned to leave. Unfortunately, his partner stood in his way. Zetsu hadn't been expecting to see Tobi so soon, though he wasn't surprised that he appeared unscathed. "Hmm? What do you want?"

"Zetsu-san!" he cried hysterically, waving his arms in the air. "Do you know any medical jutsu?"

"No." both sides responded in unison. Tobi looked crestfallen, so his white half felt the need to ask, "Why, Tobi? Did Hidan lose his head again?"

"No!" Tobi wailed dramatically, putting his masked face in his hands. "Hinata-chan is dying, DYING, and we need to heal her!"

Zetsu's black half scoffed. "*Why the hell would we care about her?! She's not Akatsuki.*"

Tobi raised his head from his hands, taking a step forward until he was inches away from his partner. Zetsu knew that the personality flip had been imminent, but he hadn't expected Tobi to take such an interest in the Hyuuga girl. "*Because, Zetsu. Deidara is too attached to the girl, and Sasori will be mad if we break his toy so soon. We can't afford to break ranks until the Bijuu have all been sealed.*" he snarled quietly, his red eye flashing behind the eyehole. Zetsu swallowed, though mostly for show. He could usually handle his partner when he got into these... 'moods'.

"I'll notify Leader-sama. See if you can't find a decent Cloud medic until then." Zetsu's black half smirked faintly, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. They had *all* gotten too attached to this little tag-along, apparently. Before Tobi could reply, he sunk into the ground, keeping the money with him.

But he didn't leave before the black-haired man nodded cheerfully at him, and he just barely heard him call out, "Alright, Cloud peoples! If one of you is a medic-nin, please step forward now...! Or else we'll have to get nasty!"

-.-.-

Thump.

It was there, no matter how faint.

Her heart had beat.

It didn't beat again for an alarming amount of time, but Deidara was just happy that she was *alive*.

...For the moment.

Blood would still be seeping into her lungs, though at a significantly slower rate. Now it was just again a matter of her not drowning, and pumping air back into her. Frankly, it was a hopeless

situation, and Deidara couldn't stand the thought of losing her *again* for the second time in an hour. Any medic would tell him to give up, but damn it! Where was Kabuto when he needed him?! That boy had healed a hole in his chest; he could stop a girl from drowning.

"Come on... don't leave me... Come on, Bya-chan... Hinata, *Hinata don't leave me.*" He felt Hidan sit beside him, looking down at the bloody mess with something like vague interest.

"She still hasn't kicked the fucking bucket yet? Good, then I still have time to convert her heathen soul," the immortal stated, taking off his beaded necklace again. Deidara ignored him.

She still wasn't breathing. After kicking the Jashinist away, the Iwa-nin knelt down, trying to feel for her heartbeat again. Nothing. Desperately, he pinched shut her nose and closed his own mouth over hers. Her lips were distressingly chill. He exhaled, feeling her chest rise beneath his hand.

In spite of a few minutes of artificial respiration, she wasn't waking up. Deidara had nearly given up, almost trying to convince himself that this wasn't a dream. The drying blood on his lips could attest to that. He heard the door open behind him, and a girlish shriek. The blonde didn't even turn, instead just stared down at Hinata.

"Wh-What happened—Raikage-sama?!" with that feminine squeal, Deidara finally turned to see *who* it was. Tobi, with some dark-haired girl who was looking very confused.

Hidan saved him the trouble of asking. "Who the fuck is that...?!"

"Medic-nin!" Tobi chirped, ushering the frightened kunoichi over to where Hinata lay. "Heal her, please?"

The medic looked down at all the blood, looking as if she wanted to throw up. Not to mention that it was clear that she'd rather be anywhere else. "U-Um... I'm sorry, sorry, but this girl is already—"

"*No she's not. Get the damn blood out of her lungs now.*" Deidara snarled, punching the floor hard enough to make a dent. The medic looked like she was about to faint.

"Please." Tobi added politely.

The girl—she couldn't have been older than fourteen, and couldn't be of higher rank than a newbie chuunin—slowly placed her hands over the Hyuuga's chest, her hands glowing briefly. Furrowing her brow, she withdrew one of her hands, the other still hovering. With that one, she made a few signs. Hidan shifted, but didn't look too nervous.

With a crackle of electricity, she gently put it onto Hinata's sternum, pressing down with a bit of force. The Hyuuga's eyelids fluttered slightly, and her body jerked a little. Deidara reached out to brush the hair out of her eyes, but the medic elbowed him sharply in the side. "A-Akatsuki or not, if you touch her, you'll only ruin the shock and get yourself hurt," she said, almost sternly. The blonde bared his teeth at her in a devilish smile, just daring the young medic to elbow him again.

Deidara hovered over her shoulder in a way that was clearly making the Kumo kunoichi nervous. He didn't care. Hinata still wasn't moving. Or breathing. Or probably living—*not now, don't think that now*, he scolded himself, biting his lip. Against his wishes, his hopes had gotten back up when he heard that single heartbeat, but now they were crashing down around him once more.

"Yeah, not that this isn't fuckin' *enthralling* and all... but I was wondering, are we just gonna bury her here in Kumo, or take her back to Ame? I'm sure that other Hyuuga brat would *love* to see her like this." Hidan snickered at the thought. Deidara pulled back his arm to punch him, but Tobi beat him to it.

"That's not a very nice thing to say! You're so mean, Hidan-san!"

The medic girl was watching the interaction with wide eyes, more than a little disturbed at the Akatsuki members' antics. A growl from the blonde beside her, however, and she hastily went back to her involuntary job. Her hand glowed a soft blue once more, and she moved it up over the Hyuuga's throat, to her mouth. It was as if the blood was coming out of her lungs, following the hand... either that, or the girl was alive enough to mutely spit up more of it in an effort to keep it out of her respiratory system.

Then all at once, Hinata jerked forward with a violent cough, and it was a repeat of before. She couldn't appear to get enough oxygen, but Deidara just leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, holding her while she expelled the rest of the blood from her lungs. She sucked in air with a sob, and she started shaking, still weakly coughing up anything remaining from her injury. The Hyuuga put her arms on his shoulders, unable to do much else than that, tears and blood running down her cheeks as she sobbed against his shoulder.

"Shh... shh... it's okay, I promise... yeah..."

-.-.-

Hinata soon slipped into a coma-like state for the trip back to Amegakure. Unbeknownst to her, she took turns riding piggyback on the three shinobi's backs. She hadn't awoken again since then, and Deidara was just starting to get worried again when they got back to the Rain.

Kabuto, probably only half-willingly, was the first one to meet them. He practically had to fight the blonde to get the injured girl away from him, carrying her off to god-knew-where to do any sort of medical crap on her. Deidara tried to follow him, but was dragged off by Pein for yet another debriefing.

The three shinobi looked down at their sandals pitifully for their actions in the Cloud. The leader stared at them for a long while, until he finally spoke up. "You killed the Raikage."

Hidan jerked his head up, pointing at Tobi. "It was him!" Tobi looked pathetically betrayed by the movement.

"Then I'll reward Tobi for a job well done."

Predictably, Hidan scowled, amending, "I mean, he just took the damn guy out. *I* was the one who *officially* fucking killed him." Deidara bit his tongue to stop from talking, but it *was* technically true. "*And* I sacrificed his body to Jashin-sama." That was also true, though only the Jashinist would be proud of such a useless task.

"You aren't mad?" Tobi ventured timidly, cocking his head to the side.

Pein grinned lopsidedly at the trio, raising an eyebrow. "Why would I be? Your mission was done once Zetsu arrived here with the money. Sasori and Kakuzu had taken care of Yutaka. Killing the Raikage only set an example to the other villages of our power." The three visibly relaxed under his ringed stare. "But I understand that there was a *problem* with the Hyuuga girl..."

"Uh... yeah. The Raikage fuckin' killed her and Deidara threw a Jashin-damn *tantrum*." Hidan evidently loved to pin the blame on others.

"Mm, yes... Sasori also said that you had a few more problems while fighting Yutaka," the leader said coolly. Deidara swallowed nervously with a blink. "...Sasori requested that he get a new partner, Deidara. Did he speak to you about this?"

"He *what*?!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Omg, poor Deidara! First the argument with Sasori, then the deal with Hinata, and now Sasori's ditching him! How will he cope with that? And what of Tobi's bizarre behavior?

Productivity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Hinata finally awoke, her hands flew to her throat. It was unbelievably sore, and it felt extremely dry. She glanced around, and found herself in a bed, but unfortunately with no handy glass of water nearby. There was, however, quite possibly the cutest thing she had ever seen.

Neji was curled up by the foot of the bed, sitting in a chair, but leaning onto the bed. He was using her leg as a pillow, looking perfectly at ease, as shinobi only did in sleep. His choppy, short locks were messier than usual, falling into his eyes and over his headband. He was snoring softly. She cooed mentally, unable to make her throat produce any sort of sound.

Hinata carefully sat up, trying to withdraw her leg from his grasp. The brunette must have been out of it; he didn't stir in the least. Now that she looked at him, the pose he was in also looked to be quite uncomfortable. This only made her wonder how long he had been awake in order to fall asleep in such a position. She swallowed nervously, remembering bits and pieces of her ordeal, and not remembering a single thing about ending back up in Amegakure.

She was just managing to wiggle a pillow under his head when she noticed that he had a bit of dried blood on his upper lip, and what looked to be like a fading bruise on his jaw. This alarmed her. Hinata leaned forward, brushing his hair out of his face to get a better look at her cousin.

"This is the first sleep he's gotten in three days, you know." A voice made her jump guiltily, looking towards the source. Kabuto was leaning against the wall, evidently having been there the entire time. Hinata flushed slightly, staring at him. "You've been out for the three days that you've been here, and Hidan said that you were unconscious during the trip back."

She looked down at the hands folded in her lap, feeling guilty.

The medic pushed himself off of the wall, strolling languidly over. He sat on the edge of her bed, looking at her. "Chin back." he said in a commanding sort of tone, and she obediently tilted her head back for him to inspect her neck. "...This reminds me why I don't particularly *like* other medics. The good news, Hinata-chan, is that aside from a sore throat for up to a week, you're fine. Your voice might be a little raspy for quite some time, but physically you are in perfect health once more."

Hinata lowered her chin, leveling her stare with him. If there was *good* news, there had to be *bad* news...

"The bit of bad news that concerns *you* is that there will be some scarring. Frankly, you should be thankful that it's not worse; they may as well have patched you up with duct tape when they brought you to me..." Kabuto sighed, running a hand through his bangs. "But I digress. The scarring isn't extensive, and it is only on the front of your neck. A scarf or a collar-like necklace could hide it quite efficiently."

She nodded, relaxing. If *that* was all...

"Of course, there will probably be worse repercussions." She blinked at him, frowning in confusion. He gave her a sly smile in return. "From what I heard, Deidara nearly lost both of his precious partners in the same mission. He's a little... edgy, and Sasori-sama isn't helping things. I

expect you'll have to do a lot of comforting for a little while."

She furrowed her brow, thinking. Of course Deidara would be shaken... but why would Sasori intentionally make it worse? After a few moments, she gently tugged on Kabuto's shoulder, nodding towards the sleeping Neji.

Kabuto chuckled slightly. "Him? Well... he and Deidara got into a fight when he saw the condition you were in. They messed each other up pretty bad, and then they had the gall to turn their anger on *me*... Nothing is wrong with either of them, I just refused to heal those superficial wounds on those pretty little faces of theirs." He smirked, somewhat sadistically. Still, there were worse things he could have done.

Hinata leaned over and wrapped her arms around him in a grateful hug.

Kabuto gently pushed her off, raising an eyebrow. "I value my life more than that hug is worth, though I appreciate the sentiment. You're welcome. ...Oh, and before I forget..." he added casually, in a tone that conveyed that he was in no danger of forgetting any such thing, "Itachi-san was looking for you. ...Something about a present...?"

Hinata raised both eyebrows, this catching her completely off guard.

The former Konoha spy just patted her on the head, replying, "You missed your birthday while you were out, princess."

Neji awoke to a dark room.

And distinct lack of Hinata.

He was awake instantly, and out of the room in just a moment. Of course, he nearly ran into her at the door, the surprised expression on her face clearly stating that she wanted to let him sleep.

He didn't say anything. Instead, he just leaned down and picked her up in a tight hug, twirling her around. Hinata laughed, rather hoarsely, turning red. Kabuto cleared his throat, giving them a pointed look. "I don't think she needs a cracked rib, Neji-san."

Neji set her back down, taking a deep breath. "Yes... I know..." he mumbled, just staring at her. He placed a kiss on her forehead, running his hands through her hair. "Hinata... promise me that you'll never scare me like that again."

She blushed and nodded, grinning sheepishly. His eyes lingered on the scars on her neck, wondering how he was supposed to protect her if she was always off frolicking with the Akatsuki...

She obviously had somewhere to go, however, so Neji just resigned himself to following her. She couldn't blame him if he stuck to her like glue for the next few days. Or months. Or years. He got a little uneasy when she made her way to the massive tower that housed the Akatsuki. She may have been welcomed there with open arms, but he highly doubted that most of the members would be as happy to receive him. Still, he just planted one hand on her shoulder, not letting go as she knocked on the large, front doors. (He also highly doubted that she usually took this route, but was doing it

merely for the fact that she had Kabuto and himself along with her.)

"Hinata-san, you don't have to knock." The door opened grandly, revealing a bored-looking, blue-haired woman. She smiled slightly when she noticed the two shinobi escorting her, moving aside to let them in. "I'm glad you've recovered, Hinata-san."

She bobbed her head in response.

"It's probably best you don't speak for a few days, I assume." The woman glanced at Kabuto as she said this, the smile still stuck on her face. He nodded, adjusting his glasses. "I'm sure Deidara-san will be down here soon for you. He's been a *wreck* without you, in all honesty..." With that and what sounded like a soft sigh, the woman wearing the Akatsuki uniform flitted off. Neji had seen her around once or twice, usually announcing laws or changes to the public. Still, this was the first time she hadn't been escorted by (probably useless) bodyguards and the Rain Lord.

Kabuto departed at a fork in the hallway, mumbling something about having to go see Sasori. Neji shrugged it off, a little grateful that the medic was leaving them be. Itachi probably wouldn't like too many visitors, anyway, and the caged bird knew *he* wasn't going anywhere, at least.

Hinata led him down a maze of passageways, almost succeeding in getting the jounin lost. Almost. Finally, she stopped in front of a door. His ward glanced at him with her white eyes, nervously, and then reached forward to knock.

The second her knuckle hit the wood, however, it swung open. She started in surprise, but not before two large arms shot out and enveloped her in a tight hug. Neji stared, a little shocked and a little more jealous, as a shark-looking Kiri-nin picked her up and took her inside before Hinata could offer little more than a squeak.

"Hidan had been spreading all of these rumors that you had died, Hinata-san! We would have missed your little ray of sunshine that you brought to this gloomy place, you know. So don't go dying without our permission!" the man scolded, setting her down in a standing position on the bed. She looked utterly bemused, and only fell to a sitting pose, poking her fingers together. Neji had followed them into the room, but the Kiri-nin either didn't care or didn't notice.

"You know, I thought I had told you *not* to do that with your fingers. It's unbecoming of a kunoichi." Neji's head snapped to the side as Uchiha Itachi spoke. He was sitting on the desk, ankles crossed, looking rather relaxed. His black eyes were on Neji, but he didn't sense (very much) killer intent. "...And you brought your cousin..."

Hinata nodded. Neji just narrowed his eyes and stared back at him. Why had she wanted to see *him* of all people? Didn't she like Deidara more? "I'm escorting her. Kabuto said she can't talk, so I figure I might mediate..." he replied tersely, crossing his arms.

Itachi nodded vaguely. "Yes... I figured that she might lose her voice after that little incident." He turned back to Hinata, who had sat on her hands to stop herself from pushing her fingers together. "It is my understanding that your birthday was a few days ago, when you were first brought back to Amegakure."

Neji almost choked on his breath. As he was trying to regain proper breathing, the Kiri-nin looked just as confused, and asked, "How did you know that, Itachi-san? And, uh, why do you *care*?"

Hinata had turned red, and looked like she was wondering about both of those herself. She nervously pushed her bangs out of her eyes, refusing to look the Uchiha in the eye.

Itachi pushed himself off of the desk, and Neji noticed that he really wasn't that tall. His partner—or he assumed the shark-man was his partner—dwarfed him. "I used to be a Konoha shinobi. ... Moreover, I had once been invited to one of her birthday parties. Our fathers had only thought it fitting that the Uchiha heir visit the Hyuuga heir on her birthday."

"...Hm." Neji coughed lightly, remembering that particular party. Judging from the shade of her face, so did Hinata. "If I may, Itachi-san... why did you remember that little bit of information for all of these years? That was nine years ago."

Itachi glanced at him with the barest hint of venom in those black eyes of his. "...I thought it polite to give my *student* a gift. She is, after all, legally an adult by ninja law." Neji didn't fail to notice the emphasis placed on 'student'. The Hyuuga prodigy stared levelly back at him, saying nothing else.

The Kiri-nin looked at Hinata with a sort of surprise, putting his hand on her head to push it back to look into her eyes. "You're sixteen, then? Well, congrats, kid. That makes you *technically* the youngest ninja ever to, um, *affiliate* with the Akatsuki. Since you didn't join and all." He grinned, revealing sharpened teeth.

"Kisame, please be quiet." Itachi said, almost tiredly. The black-haired ninja gave a low whistle, and out from under the bed came a cat. Three sets of eyes, two white and one yellow, went down to stare at the feline, which just stalked over and jumped up into Itachi's arms. The cat politely shed its gray fur all over his black uniform. "...This is Kisho. He's yours." He didn't sound particularly happy about the fur.

The cat turned to eye Hinata warily, flicking his black ears. She shook her head, denying the gift. Itachi just held Kisho out at arm's length, and the cat meowed uncomfortably. He continued standing there until she got up to rescue him from the awkward position. She looked down at the cat in her arms, who also politely shed his gray fur all over her jacket as well.

She tried to pass the cat onto Neji, but as he was wearing a decidedly non-gray shirt, he declined. Hinata turned back to Itachi, silently mouthing 'thank you'. He nodded with a slight shrug. Kisame guided both of them out the door, grinning. "Okay, now go off and play with the nice kitty. I'm just glad that the annoying cat won't bring dead mice in anymore..." Kisho looked pleased with himself at that statement. "I expect Deidara will throw a fit when Kabuto tells him that you've woken up. Better go find him!"

And the door was shut behind them, forcing the two Hyuuga out into the hall with the feline. Kisho just shed more on Hinata, purring. She and Neji looked at each other for a moment, and then he flatly asked, "Deidara?"

Hinata only nodded.

-.-.-

As they headed towards Deidara's room, Hinata realized what a mess she had caused of things. Deidara *had* almost lost both of his partners on that single mission... that could not have been good for him. She imagined him as a sobbing wreck, clinging to her and saying how much he was worried about both her and Sasori. It was a little too plausible in her mind to be that humorous.

Either luckily or unluckily, his room was quite far from Itachi's. It gave her time to muse on the blonde's turmoil, and by the time they were actually standing in front of his door, *she* was nearly in tears. Neji had to knock for her. There was silence to answer him. Hinata was just starting to believe he'd committed suicide in his angst when the brunette Hyuuga knocked again.

This time, there was a thump on the other side of the door and an irritated, "*What?*" A disheveled blonde opened the door, kicking something out of the way behind him. When he turned and saw that it was her, though, his eye widened almost comically. After a beat, he choked out, "Hinata...?"

Hinata was more than a little surprised. Evidently, Neji was as well, but of course he masked said surprise better. She hadn't ever been called by her real name by him, not even when he'd been mad at her. She just stared at him with large eyes, unable to respond even if she'd wanted to.

Deidara practically tackled her in a hug, and very nearly sent them both tumbling into the corridor. Kisho meowed at the sudden attack, but he was drowned out by Deidara shouting, "Bya-chan, it is you, yeah! That Kabuto bastard hadn't told me that you had woken up!" Well, at least the nickname was back, and all of her fears about his mental health were quickly dismissed.

"What ever happened to you *not* swearing in her presence?" Neji asked sourly, ruining the potentially heartwarming reunion. Hinata sent him a disapproving look, but it disappeared as she was pulled inside by Deidara (who ignored Neji, of course).

His room was the same, except for the sudden increase of clay sculptures. And by 'increase' it meant 'massive surplus to the point where there was no room to sit or walk'. Hinata was surprised yet again. Kisho jumped down from her arms, stalking around the room, weaving in and out of the art. The cat paused to bat halfheartedly at a miniature figurine of Deidara. The sculpture aimed a kick at him, much to Kisho's amazement.

Before they could get into a tussle, the real Deidara hastily swooped in and rescued himself, setting the living clay on one of the small open spots on his desk. It stuck out all three tongues at him arrogantly. "Umm, you don't want to mess with Karura, kitty. It wouldn't be pretty if he detonated. ...What's *with* the cat, yeah?" He turned back to the two Hyuuga, pointing at the cat.

"That's Kisho. A... present... for Hinata." Neji replied for her, since she was unable to. Deidara seemed to catch onto this, and dug around in his desk for something. Cheerfully he handed her a notebook and a pencil to write with.

"You had better not be talking, yeah! Just stick to writing for awhile." He yet again ignored Neji, much to the latter's annoyance.

Hinata wrote down 'thank you', showing it to him with a smile.

Deidara grinned at her, looking like the prime example of happy. "Who'd give you the get-well present? And why a *cat*, yeah?"

Before Hinata could stop him, Neji replied, "It was a birthday present, from Itachi." She could have hit him. Predictably, Deidara's jaw dropped, and he looked at her in disbelief.

"...*Birthday*? You never told me you had a birthday! When was it? Why did *Itachi*, of all people, know, yeah?! What do you want for a gift? How old are you, yeah?" He kept pestering her with questions until she was practically forced to write 'can we please talk about something else?'. Deidara looked a little crestfallen, but soon picked himself back up.

"How long are you not allowed to talk, yeah?" he asked, absently patting the 'Karura' on the head.

It didn't seem terribly amused. Kisho was staring at it with bright, large eyes, following Deidara's hand movements, the tip of his tail twitching minutely.

'About a week'. Hinata looked at the tiny Deidara, unable to restrain her curiosity. 'What's a Karura?' she wrote. Deidara glanced at Neji, seeming almost wary of telling him.

"C4 bomb, yeah," he finally said, with a broad, triumphant beam. Hinata's eyes went down to the tiny thing once more. She had seen the Iwa-nin create some pretty massive bombs with C2 and C3 chakra, so why was this C4 one so *small*? As if sensing her question, Deidara went on sheepishly, "Well, it's still sort of in the early stages... But even at this size, I could probably take out a room of people, yeah!" He looked down at the rest of the sculptures littering the ground, adding, "Well, with *this* room of clay, I could probably take out a few villages, yeah. *Nothing* is going to beat these bombs, now, yeah."

Hinata's ninja mind took over and read the hidden meaning, doing the math for her. He had been working on his clay this whole time, even getting to the point where he'd created his own C4 Karura. The dark-haired kunoichi looked around the room at the rest of the various sculptures; dragons and birds and snakes and insects and even what looked like a large scorpion hiding under his desk. He had gone to all this trouble because he'd been worried about not being strong enough, not having enough clay or firepower.

He was worried about losing his partners.

Hinata looked over her shoulder, silently pleading for her cousin to leave. He stared back at her for a long moment, his expression blank, before finally turning and shutting the door behind him. She made a mental note to thank him later.

Not saying anything, she sat down on the bed beside him, moving a pair of birds out of the way. One of them twittered silently at her, and she realized that most of the clay in the room was alive, but merely watching. Hinata turned his head to face her, and stared at him, willing him to tell her what was bothering him. She and Sasori were both fine, and yes the experience probably shook him, but they were *fine*. That was all that mattered, really.

Deidara stared back unblinkingly. She moved the fringe of blonde hair out of his face, and noticed with a little fascination that he didn't have his scope on. The other eye was closed, but it was the first time that she had seen him without it. He looked so much younger like this. Hinata wondered just how old he was, and what else he had done in his life that had pushed him into joining the Akatsuki. It was too sad of a fate for someone so young.

She pulled him against her chest in a tight hug, feeling incredibly sorry for him. He had probably been lonely nearly all of his life, and now that he finally got some friends, he is reminded of normal shinobi mortality. It was cruel, plain and simple.

"Sasori-danna asked Leader-sama to switch partners, yeah," he mumbled against her shoulder.

Hinata pulled him away from her with a gasp so she could look him in the eye. He avoided her gaze, but she just kept moving until he had no choice but to look at her. Hinata stood corrected; nothing was cruel compared to *this*. Now his partner, the one he was supposed to *depend* on, was bailing out on him! Deidara's blue eyes went down again, and Hinata just swallowed. She hadn't expected losing her voice would happen during something like *this*, especially when he needed comforting.

This time, he pulled her into a hug, and she just wrapped her arms around him. Even if Sasori was going to leave, that jerk, she would stay by Deidara's side. She'd never wanted to kill someone so

much before in her life.

Deidara just kept talking. "Leader-sama hasn't approved anything yet, yeah. I think he'd switch with Kakuzu... Hidan is funny and all, but I don't like him, yeah. I like Sasori-danna better. He's an *artist* at least, and Hidan is annoying... I'd miss him. I don't think he likes me very much, but he's strong, and he at least treats me like an artist. I thought... I thought we were finally getting *past* some of our differences..."

He was just breaking her heart into tinier and tinier pieces. She had thought that their bickering was cute, in a way, and it only proved that they cared about each other's opinions enough to keep it up. She had thought that it was the way they showed that they cared about *each other*. Sasori wouldn't just dump him onto Hidan because of one botched mission, would he...? Hinata knew she had to have a talk with the stoic redhead—as soon as she got her voice back, at least. Because she needed to do some yelling.

Deidara's voice was flat, and at least it didn't sound like he was going to cry. It was almost like he'd gotten rid of all of his tears already and just felt... hollow. Hinata felt like she was going to cry for him. He sounded so *pitiful*, really.

"Leader-sama is going to approve of the trade if Kakuzu allows it. He doesn't seem to think that he will, since his and Hidan's fighting styles go together so well, yeah... but even if we don't swap, how can things ever return to normal? Sasori-danna... he's such an asshole, yeah..." He just couldn't muster up the hatred in his voice to make it convincing, and Hinata was sure that the blonde would miss his partner more than he let on if he got switched.

-.-.-

Kabuto finally let her speak again eight days later. Her voice was still raspy, but she was just glad to be allowed to talk again. And she finally got to verbally thank everyone for the gifts. Aside from Kisho—whose favorite pastime seemed to be shedding on all of her clothes—she had gotten a *very* lovely necklace and matching kimono from her cousin (she had thrown a fit about receiving such luxurious gifts, but he said that he'd burn them unless she took them), a hair clip from Konan, a pair of earrings that were supposedly from the leader but she really suspected that the blunette forced him to give them to her, a Jashinist rosary from Hidan (she didn't expect to wear it very often, if at all), a hug and a journal from Tobi, and a beautiful koi fish from Kisame. (Unfortunately, Kisho took one look at the fish and almost ended up eating it. She respectfully returned the fish for its own good.)

After three days of worrying about it, Deidara finally just took her out to dinner and gave her a pretty clay dove. (Kisho also tried to eat that, but decided that clay didn't taste very good.) Dinner was awkward at first, but soon they celebrated Hinata's birthday and regaining of speech with a rather in depth conversation about art and the art of one's own style within the confines of a ninja village. As long as they stayed away from the topic of the Akatsuki, it was all good.

Things rapidly returned to normal. She had received a few jokes about being of legal age, but usually Neji or Deidara was with her to repel the offender. Deidara still seemed a little fragile about his partner, though the leader had mysteriously vanished and could not be contacted for any updates on the situation whatsoever.

It was nearly a week after that when she first got the opportunity to find something more out.

Kisho had had to live with Neji, mostly because several of the members were complaining about the cat. Which was odd, considering that he was living there before with them, just with Itachi, but she supposed that waking up to find all manners of dead creatures in her bed *was* a little disturbing. The nightmares had subsided for the most part, and frankly Hinata didn't care what kind of wake-up call she got, so long as she was getting a good night's sleep. Occasionally she still had rather dark dreams about golden- and red-eyed ninja, but they didn't scare her all that much anymore. The heiress wondered if she was finally growing up a bit.

She had been on her way to see Neji—and Kisho, the cat had never let them ignore him and demanded attention—when she heard someone approaching down a perpendicular hallway. Looking up, she saw the familiar red mop of hair and dull brown eyes. Hinata stopped dead in mid-step, just staring at Sasori as he approached. He didn't seem overly surprised to see her there, but she had slowly become a familiar object in and out of the Akatsuki tower.

"You..." she breathed, her voice still a little raspy. Sasori stopped a few feet in front of her, his arms hidden dangerously inside his sleeves. He looked like he was daring her to try something. Hinata worked up the best glare and scowl combination she could muster, clenching her fists at her sides. "You... wh-what do you think you're doing to Deidara-kun...?!"

Sasori tilted his head harmlessly to the side, raising one eyebrow a fraction. "...I think we need to have a talk, princess. Come." He pushed past her and continued down the hall, probably towards his own room.

Hinata refused to move. "You can't order me around, Sasori! I'm not your puppet or your *partner*!" she called after him, halting him in his tracks.

The puppeteer turned to regard her coldly over one shoulder. In the blink of an eye, he had her pinned against the wall with a blade at her throat. He hissed, "*Don't* overstep your boundaries. You are *not* an Akatsuki member and you don't need to be getting accustomed to acting like one. The rest of the organization may treat you like a princess, but don't expect the same from me. I can kill you in a dozen different ways without batting an eye, and I hope that you don't forget that."

Hinata melted into the wall, stepping back out behind him and sinking to her knees, gasping for breath. He had never been rough with her before—none of them had, really—and her neck was still sore. And he *let* her get away, too. There was truth in what he said, she admitted reluctantly. "...W-We do still need to have a talk... Sasori-san. About Deidara and what you're doing to him."

"Agreed," he said with a smirk. She was more scared of him then than when he had her pinned against the wall.

-.-.-

The Hyuuga girl was unusually astute in such things, so Sasori knew he had to be careful. He wasn't particularly pleased with speaking to her, but it needed to be done. She—and indirectly, Deidara—needed to know what was going on and why he was trying to push the blonde away. If only the leader would approve of his switch... but he had a feeling that the man was ignoring the request and was letting them figure it out on their own.

Hinata was seated on his bed, hands folded in her lap and back perfectly straight. Sasori glanced at her pose, shaking his head. Such things were probably proper of a girl of her stature, but an

uncomfortable pose didn't allow fast reflexes in a fight situation. She needed to learn that in Amegakure, no one *cared* if she was the Hyuuga's heir.

"I was bluffing," he started in bluntly. She blinked in surprise, totally nonplussed as to what he was talking about. "On the mountainside, with Yutaka. I had been bluffing."

"...Oh..." she murmured, eyes immediately going down to the hands in her lap. Sasori noticed that she didn't have her nails painted purple anymore.

"If you and Deidara would have figured that out, things wouldn't have had to have gotten so messy. Yutaka would have fled out of my body, and I could have merely headed out of his range and help you destroy the network with my puppets." he said dispassionately, pacing the floor. "I don't *really* want to die, you know."

"How, um... how were we supposed to know that you were lying?" she asked in a small voice.

"You could have used the three pound mass of tissue and neurons filling the space between your ears." he replied coldly, sighing in exasperation. "Deidara was too worried that I was serious to even begin to think about other routes of action. He is a smart kid, I will allow, but his genius is easily blinded by his need for bonds. I'll admit that I was relying on you to figure it out, Hinatahime... but it seems that *you* were blinded by your affection for the brat."

"B-Because of one mistake... you're going to just *quit*?" Hinata accused, her white eyes flashing with something that could have been malice. Sasori smirked expectantly, wondering if she could work up the courage to actually give him a talking to. "Deidara-kun is... he's *fragile*, Sasori. The only reason he acts so clingy is because he's been alone all those years before joining and finding us. I-I know we don't know each other very well, and our only connection is through him. But *please*, don't do this to him."

"If he really is so fragile, he doesn't need to be in the organization. Frailty is only a weakness." he replied easily, blocking her argument effortlessly.

Hinata pouted, narrowing her eyes. "He's not *weak*. He was strong enough to kill a Sannin and the Kazekage. I seem to recall that *you* got off easy with the Sanbi because it didn't know how to use its own strength."

"I don't see how that has to do anything with the point at hand," he said, entirely nonplussed by the jab.

"The point is, he has overcome these obstacles and gotten *strong*. You know he respects you, and he's been doing it to try to gain back a little bit of that respect from you. He's made a C4 in his spare time while he was sulking because you wouldn't talk to him!"

"...A C4 level bomb?" Sasori was amused by this. Truthfully, Deidara's skill with clay and explosives was quite admirable, and he could only imagine what kind of 'masterpiece' the brat could create with a C4 level bomb. "Then why isn't he this productive *all* the time?"

Hinata flushed. "Because he's trying to *impress* you, obviously... He's so worried about losing you, and you are a-a *bastard* to ignore him like this!"

"Deidara stopped censoring himself around you, didn't he?" he asked with a rue grin. She reddened further, looking away. Sasori then continued, all amusement gone, "You can beg and plead all you like, princess. My mind is made up. Deidara has disobeyed more than one direct order and put several of his missions in jeopardy already. I don't want such an impulsive child as my partner."

"He wasn't being *impulsive*," she said softly. "He was just worried about you..."

"As I have said, it is a sign of weakness—"

"It's not weakness! Deidara is a-a very strong ninja and you're just angry because he cares about you and—and you care about him even if you won't admit it!"

Sasori was shocked at her audacity and presumptuousness. "What the *hell* gives you that idea?"

"Why else would you have wanted us to leave? You've always looked out for Deidara, and you're just a stuck-up, snobby elitist who thinks that just because he's got a wooden body he can't have human emotions!"

With that, Hinata stormed furiously out the door, slamming it behind her. Sasori sighed, sinking down onto his bed. That was *not* how that was supposed to go...

-.-.-

"You shouldn't switch them." Konan said casually, draping an arm over her partner. Pein didn't seem amused, and just flipped a page in the book he was reading. The azure-haired woman leaned on the top of his head, running her fingers through his spiky hair. "You're only going to hurt the organization. They work well together, and so do the other pairs. That's how you wanted it to be."

The leader still didn't say anything, though his mind clearly wasn't taking in the words on the page. His ringed eyes went over the same paragraph about five times before Konan shut the book for him, tossing it across the room.

"You don't want to cause turmoil within the ranks right now, do you...?" she whispered in his ear, idly playing with his many earrings. Pein finally turned to look at her, raising a pierced eyebrow.

"Since when do you care?"

"Since we're coming so close to finishing off sealing the Bijuu. We only have three more demons," she replied innocently. "Two more and then the Kyuubi. ... You *know* we're going to have to officially declare war if we even want to get near him. We're going to be pressed to take down the entire village."

"True..." He tried to pull her into his lap, but she just disappeared in a flurry of papers, reappearing behind him once more. She folded her arms and set them on his head, putting her chin on top of them. Pein looked a little annoyed at the move, snorting. "The two remaining Sannin, the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki, and a few of the jounin are what we really have to worry about. The rest is just a matter of quantity, not quality."

"Then shouldn't you also be preparing Ame for war? We've been attracting rogues and missing-nin from all of the other villages, and our own numbers are starting to swell," Konan said lightly, adjusting the flower in her hair. "If you're focusing outside the Akatsuki, you can't be worrying about what's happening inside it."

"I wasn't going to switch them. Sasori and Deidara are just acting like children; they'll figure it out themselves. When the time comes, they'll fight together." Pein yawned, stretching. Using the move to cover his real motive, he then wrapped his arms around her neck and brought her back down

onto his lap with a smirk. Konan looked at him expectantly, almost daring him to try something.

"I'm glad that you have faith in our little group. It's almost like we're a family, really..." she said softly, sticking her tongue out at him.

"We're so close to completing the collection of Bijuu. How could I *not* have faith? The Rain is growing in power, and thanks to Tobi—and indirectly the blonde brat that Sasori's trying to get rid of—the Cloud is crippled. If we hurry, they can't participate in this war and it's one less village we have to worry about." he said with a grin. He leaned down, brushing his lips against her cheek, repeating in a murmur, "We're so close..."

"Soon Amegakure will rule the world, and the world will bow down to their new god," she replied simply, closing her eyes. "...Sensei might be surprised to hear of that."

"I can deal with sensei. You'll have to worry about the rest of the Leaf."

"They won't be a problem." Konan once again disappeared from his lap, reappearing with a swirl of papers, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I think... that this plan is coming to fruition, and the ending should be exceedingly easy, war or not."

"I'm rather looking forward to a war. It'll demonstrate the collective power of the Akatsuki, and my village." Pein replied, folding his hands nonchalantly behind his head. He glanced at her, smirking. "...Two more demons and then the Kyuubi. Itachi will take care of the Kyuubi, and I suppose Kisame is going to help him. Kakuzu and Zetsu, their Bijuu will be the last before the end. Amazing, isn't it, Konan?"

"Hmmm... just slightly." She smiled vapidly at him, absently forming an origami butterfly in one hand. The paper fluttered off of its own accord, disappearing out into an open window and the rainy sky beyond. The rain drops hit the fragile origami, weakening it until it finally fell out of sight to its own demise. Konan's smile shifted into something more sinister, almost foreboding. The woman turned to her partner once more, and said with a note of finality, "The end of the world is coming to those poor fools."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Hinata finally approaches Sasori with the subject of Deidara. Ame gets ready for war as the remaining Bijuu are stalked, and Neji likewise prepares himself for the task of serving under the Rain. ...I wonder where Sasuke has been this whole time...

One of the Guys

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Life once again returned to some semblance of normalcy.

Or rather, normalcy for a ninja village run by the Akatsuki.

Hinata had been spending more and more time with Neji, mostly because the leader had decided that switching partners would be troublesome, and she and Sasori weren't exactly getting along. And more than once Deidara himself had chased her off, saying that he was practicing his bombs and she could get killed. (She had no idea why he was suddenly so worried about his bombs, but she had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with that C4 of his.)

She got to see a different side of Amegakure, the one where the Akatsuki was a group of shadowy figures and the leader was a god. Konan was the only one most of the villagers saw on a semi-regular schedule, mostly when she was announcing more plans or laws for the rebuilding village, and was referred to as nothing less than an angel. Only some of the higher-ranking shinobi recognized her as the Hyuuga that usually tagged along with Deidara, and accordingly kept their distance.

Frankly, Hinata was *amazed* at how the village really was. After recovering from its long civil war and economic troubles under the leadership of Pein, it was flourishing. Neji hadn't been lying when he'd said that there had been an increase of ninja. Due to its policy of selecting any missing-nin who could prove themselves capable, they also had quite the variety of ninja. (Hinata was thinking of making a checklist to see if they had a ninja from every country.) Civilians, fleeing disasters, troubles or even having been exiled, were also flooding in. It was almost as large of a village as Konohagakure.

Hinata could see the past lives that these people had left behind. Ex-ANBU usually kept to the shadows when walking, and they had an air of mystery around them. Many of them looked sorely lost without their masks. (Ame didn't have an ANBU section. The heiress supposed that was because the Akatsuki sort of stood in that place.) Genin and chuunin looked more at ease, even curious about living in a new village. One could tell who had seen the worst missions or the war; they were the ones who were completely nonchalant about living in the Rain.

She and Neji strolled through the rainy village, sharing an umbrella. Many people they passed didn't bother; when the place was perpetually raining, it paid off to get used to being soaked when outside. Hinata had been mentally counting off how many actual *Rain* ninja she saw and was quite surprised that they made up only about a third of the shinobi she saw. There weren't a large number of Konoha ninja, and those that she saw she didn't recognize. She hadn't worn her own hitai-ate in months now, and Neji's was hanging loosely from his neck, mostly hidden by his jacket. Chances were that they'd be recognized first as Hyuuga, and secondly as Konoha-nin. If at all.

It seemed like there were a rather large number of Kumo-nin. Hinata could only wonder if it had to do with the fact that their Raikage had died about two weeks ago. When the third Hokage had died, their village had certainly taken a downhill slide.

"Neji?" she asked, still watching the mismatched ninja all around.

"Hm?"

"You said that there was an 'audition' for ninja. To officially become part of the village, right...?" She turned her white eyes on his, cocking her head to the side. He nodded, visibly wondering where she was going with this. "Did you have to go through it?"

"...Yes. By all rights, I'm legally a Rain jounin." he replied casually, shrugging. Hinata frowned thoughtfully. *She* hadn't gone through any such thing...

"Wh-What was it like...?" she asked in a hushed voice that was barely audible over the rain.

"Very... informal. I had joined about a month after you came here, after all. Most villagers were still panicking over the fact that the Akatsuki had taken over. I was interviewed by an Ame shinobi, and he just asked me where I was from, what rank I had been, whether or not I had a bloodline limit... things like that. I would assume that they stepped up security since then."

"Yes, they would have..." she sighed. For some reason, the situation felt surreal. She had been born a Konoha kunoichi, and now she was probably classified as a missing-nin or an Ame-nin. All by accident, too. Did everyone here feel as displaced as she?

"Once in awhile, the rumors say that an Akatsuki member interviews the newcomers." Neji said, looking at her frown. "...What's wrong?"

"I'm just... curious as to how the Akatsuki could have formed up their own *village*."

"Technically, they didn't. Amegakure was around before. It had been severely weakened by its civil war, and that's probably what led the leader to take it over." he corrected. Hinata didn't bother telling him about the mission that it had entailed.

"Yeah..." They lapsed into silence, walking on to their destination: Hinata's favorite teashop. After discovering that she was quite in love with their green tea, Neji had created the tradition of taking her there whenever the chance arose. And while Hinata was not objecting to her favorite treat, she *was* objecting to the fact that he took the bill every single time. *This time*, she vowed, *Neji-niisan isn't going to pay for me. He already spoils me too much...*

They arrived at the teashop, stepping inside and shaking off their soaked umbrella. Hinata turned to Neji, bent on paying for the tea herself this time. "Neji—"

"You're wearing the necklace I gave you." he cut in, raising both eyebrows. She paled, then rapidly reddened, caught off guard by the remark.

"W-Well, it's pretty and I *do* l-like it..." she mumbled, ducking her head to hide her face.

He smiled, almost triumphantly, and sat down at their usual table. "It looks good on you. It matches your eyes."

"It matches *your* eyes, too. D-Does that mean that *you* would wear it?" she asked slyly, grinning back at him. The brunette rolled his eyes, obviously trying not to scowl at the mental image.

"Not quite." he replied evasively, scratching his cheek. "I meant it for you, anyway. It's the thought that counts."

"True..." Hinata fidgeted uncomfortably, trying to simultaneously resist playing with the charm on the necklace and poking her fingers together. Neji knew her too well; he wasn't going to allow her to pay for this meal, or any coming ones, unless she could catch him off guard. And to catch him off guard, she needed to do something sneaky, like a ninja. ...*Oh no, I'm thinking like Sasori!*

Unaware that her protector was watching her with slight concern, she hid her face in her hands in a failed attempt to stop herself from blushing. *Just* what she needed, to have an Akatsuki member's cold persona rubbing off on her! Of all the ninja she knew, why did she have to pick up *Sasori's* personality traits? Why not Deidara's—or even Itachi's? (Not that the Uchiha's would be much of an improvement from Sasori.)

Hinata felt a tentative hand on her shoulder, and she jumped forcefully. Forcefully enough to accidentally tip over her chair. Before she could do much more than yelp in surprise, Neji caught her and was still looking at her with slightly amused, vaguely concerned eyes. "...Are you alright?"

She nodded gratefully, and he sat back down beside her. She was intensely aware of his eyes on her, and after a few awkward moments, she added, "I think I'm spending too much time with the Akatsuki..."

"Yes. You are." he replied easily, smiling helplessly when she fixed him with a mild glare. "What did you expect me to reply with?"

"I-I don't know... Sasori-san's been hostile toward me, and I don't know why. Deidara-kun hasn't been paying as much attention to me, either..." When she put it that way, the heiress realized that she sounded like she was whining. In all actuality, she was just worried. "H-He made a new bomb. C4. He calls it 'Karura'..." she mumbled in addition.

"Knowing that dumb blonde," Neji started, setting his chin in his palm, "If he just made that kind of bomb, he undoubtedly doesn't know its full potential. Moreover, he ought to know that it's unstable until he works with it more. That's why he's pushing you away right now. ...To protect you."

At this, she perked up a little. "Really...? You think so?"

"Either that or he's having an affair with his partner." Hinata mimicked a tomato with her blush, hiding her face once more. Neji really shouldn't be teasing her like this, anyway. And it was unfair to use Deidara against her!

"Do-Don't say s-such things!" she cried, trying not to give him the satisfaction of her smile. She was immensely relieved when the waitress brought them their tea, and hastily seized the cup and pretended to drink. If only for the sake of not having to say anything else.

Neji was looking at her with a strange expression, though, and his eyes staring at her with such intensity was making her nervous. It was also making it exceedingly difficult to drink—or pretend to. "...Do you like him?"

Hinata set down her cup, cocking her head. "Who? Deidara-kun? Of course I like him—"

"No, romantically. Are you involved with him?" he asked seriously and unblinkingly. He looked a little too much like her father for her comfort.

Hinata would have preferred the teasing.

She sunk low in her chair, though she didn't quite know why. *She* knew that she and Deidara were nothing more than friends. Or even siblings, really. But explaining their relationship to someone like Neji... was next to impossible. "He-He's like... a-a b-big brother..." she said faintly, and realized a moment too late that Neji had already filled that role for her. Curse her little sister role to all these guys! "I-I me-mean—"

"Hm?" He made an odd sound in his throat, narrowing his eyes slightly. Hinata recognized that

expression. It was his 'do-I-need-to-kill-someone?' expression.

"Dei-Deidara-kun is m-my best friend," she said lamely, severely wishing that she could have come up with something better. It was the easiest and cleanest way to explain it, though. Neji stared at her for another excruciatingly long moment, then appeared to accept it as an answer.

"But... does he feel the same about you? Just friends...?" he asked, his white eyes piercing enough that they could have been glowing.

-.-.-

Neji had to admit that he'd had an ulterior motive to asking his cousin that. He wished he could take it back, however, after seeing her reaction to the question. Hinata rapidly colored, then paled enough so that her skin matched her eyes. Several times, she opened her mouth to reply, only to close it again without a sound. Feeling a stab of remorse, he tried to amend his mistake by saying, "Look, I didn't mean—"

"I-I don't know..." she said weakly, sinking down even further into her chair. Her chin was practically resting on the table. She sounded confused, and almost a little scared... "I don't know wh-what Deidara-kun thinks of me-me..." Neji was alarmed to see that she was trembling, and looked the closest to fainting as he'd ever seen. (And that was saying something, considering how long he'd known her.)

Did the question really cause her that much strife?

It was just a little disconcerting, but more distressing was that Neji found himself oddly jealous of the situation. Or rather, he was jealous of Deidara, and the fact that the blonde may pose a little bit of a threat. Moreover, a confused Hinata did not equal a happy Neji. If she didn't get to him first, he'd have to have a talk with Deidara...

-.-.-

Sasori could have sworn that he'd made himself practically invisible to anyone. No one could find him, of that he was sure. Still, Deidara seemed to have an innate sense about where he was, and had tracked him down. He was like a nin-dog or something. But sure enough, no matter how much ninjutsu, stealth, or excuses he used, the redhead found himself cornered (literally) by his partner.

"...Yes?" he asked lamely, for severe lack of something less awkward to say. No doubt Hinata had run off like a good little kunoichi and told him of their argument, and Sasori was quite positive that the leader was ignoring his request and had left him to fend for himself. In short, he was screwed.

"You, come." Deidara barked tersely, grabbing his elbow and propelling him down the hall away from the relative safety of his room. The blonde was unusually brusque, but that was probably because he was angry.

"Are you going to sacrifice me to Jashin?" he asked lightly, only half joking. Hidan had been wondering for quite awhile if his heathen god would take puppet sacrifices. Unnervingly, Deidara

didn't answer him. Sasori began to seriously doubt his partner's mental health at that point, and wondered if anyone would bother giving him a funeral. Kabuto, maybe. If he was drunk.

Deidara steered him out of the tower via window, and jumped out into the rain onto the nearest rooftop. Sasori glanced around him in a fake expression of nervousness, completely at ease. He could still kill Deidara, though he admitted to himself that he *really* didn't want to take that route. The Suna-nin was led farther and farther from the comparative safety of the Akatsuki tower, but it wasn't until they left the village that he began to suspect that Deidara actually wanted to kill him.

Or maybe shout at him a bit. Still, Sasori wasn't sure which he would prefer. Surely dying would be easier than suffering through some of the verbal weapons Deidara could pull out against him.

He forced him to one of the nearby cliffs, overlooking one of the Rain's massive lakes. "Wood floats, I'll have you know. It won't be hard to find the body." Deidara gave him a sharp look, obviously surprised by the comment.

"I'm not going to kill you... yeah." he said flatly, almost looking like he was pouting. The redhead rolled his eyes at him. He immediately snapped back to attention when the Iwa-nin began signing, and he no doubt visibly fought the urge to put some space between them. For saying he wasn't going to kill him, this wasn't a reassuring development.

Deidara bent over and spit out a puddle of liquid-like clay, which rapidly solidified and built itself up into the basic shape of a man. Sasori watched mutely. The features on the clay refined themselves until it was a perfect likeness of the blonde explosives expert, albeit lifeless and the same off-white color that his clay had. The real Deidara glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, wiping off his chin. "Well?"

"Well *what*? It's a clay clone. You've done that before." Sasori snapped on reflex, looking down at his feet a moment later. Sometimes he wished he could take such harsh things back.

"No it's not, yeah. Watch." The redhead looked up to see Deidara finishing off another set of seals, and the clay came to life with a jerk. In addition, its coloration darkened until even its black and red cloak matched Deidara's perfectly. "This... is my C4, yeah. Its name is Karura."

"Ka... rura..." The name sounded strange on his tongue. Sasori inspected the clone closely, comparing it with what he knew of his partner. The so-called Karura stared back at him, with animosity and a cold glare that Deidara never had. "It is... interesting, but I do not see the point of this," he said carefully, walking around the clay creation warily, "As I've said, you've made clay clones before, bombs or not."

"Karura is a different type of art, yeah." Deidara was becoming more and more talkative, and he was fighting a losing battle over whether or not to grin. Sasori was secretly thankful for this. A moody partner was something he couldn't deal with. "The C4 isn't like my other bombs."

Sasori was trying to figure out *how* it wasn't like his other bombs when Deidara decided to ask another question. One that wasn't as neutral as he'd been acting.

"Sasori-danna... what is it about me that you don't like, yeah?"

The Suna puppeteer halted in mid-step for just the slightest pause, one that would have gone unnoticed if he hadn't been in the presence of a fellow Akatsuki member. He finished his circle around the Karura, keeping his eyes firmly on the clay Deidara, not the real one. Karura stared flatly back with blank eyes.

Sasori had been dreading this question for some time. He answered it as carefully as he could, still pretending to inspect Karura. Truthfully, he was looking for some small discrepancy between it and the real one to point out and save himself. "...It's not what I don't like about *you*."

"You don't like something about yourself." Deidara finished for him, walking behind his C4 creation to try to catch his partner's eye. Sasori wouldn't let him do anything of the sort, and instead turned around and crossed his arms. "You don't like the fact that you're a puppet and that you actually like me as a partner, yeah."

"Your princess has been talking to you, I see," he said, still trying to figure out how to get himself out of this hole without digging himself in deeper. Since Deidara didn't respond, he was forced to say something else. "Partnerships... are based on trust."

"Yeah." Deidara evidently wasn't willing to give anything in this conversation. He was making his senior partner do all the talking. Sasori grit his teeth, closing his eyes and resisting the urge to flee or throttle him.

"You and I can't trust each other." Sasori wouldn't get cornered in this discussion if it killed him.

"Why not? I trust you, Sasori-danna, yeah." the blonde said plaintively, no doubt beginning to sulk.

Such a child... he thought with a mental scowl. "I don't trust you and you *can't* trust me. You've disobeyed several direct orders, so how am I supposed to believe that you'll not let me down in another crucial time?"

"Danna... the fact that you're still here means you can trust me, yeah." Deidara pointed out in an unsympathetic tone.

"You *can't* trust *me*." Sasori repeated stubbornly.

"Because you're a puppet and you think that you can't affiliate with a human? Or that you're unreliable, yeah?" There was a smirk in the Iwa-nin's voice, and Sasori's patience was beginning to wear thin. Soon he'd probably do something he'd regret.

"I wasn't aware you *cared* what I was." he said calmly, a little hurt by the thought that Deidara would.

"I don't. *You* do, yeah. You think you're so cool, and that you can't have any friends because you're different. Well you're wrong, danna. 'Cause me and—and I guess Bya-chan—and maybe even Kabuto are all your friend and you aren't getting rid of us that easily, yeah." Deidara said triumphantly.

"You know, Hinata used the term 'snobby elitist'. I think it was more eloquent," he threw out indifferently. Deidara had the annoying ability to get him on the ropes in any conversation rather quickly, and Sasori knew he'd have to figure out a way to beat that one day. The kid was too inexperienced and naïve to use the skill too often. "Kabuto and Hinata are officially subordinates. You are the only one who treats them any different. The Akatsuki isn't as friendly and familial as it has seemed, you annoying little brat, and you're getting too soft. Not everyone who meets you is going to *like* you, Deidara."

Sasori risked a look over his shoulder, and Deidara was just leaning on the Karura, almost lazily. "You talk a lot of shit, yeah."

That was it. Sasori couldn't handle his impudence any longer, and he *needed* to throttle the disrespectful little brat. Deidara had been toeing the line since his entrance into the organization,

and he finally pissed someone off enough to matter. Too bad it was Sasori.

"You—" Deidara back flipped out of the way just as the metal cord shot out of his sleeve, aimed for his throat. The blonde wasn't as lucky in midair; he couldn't dodge as easily. He already had a bird in his hand, but the cable wrapped around his ankles and yanked him downward before he could do much else. The lifeless, tiny bird fell limply to the ground, out of Deidara's reach. He was busy trying to kick his way out of Sasori's grip, but to no avail.

"—are going to—" Sasori advanced on him, pulling out the blades in his back. Deidara glowered at him, then broke out into a broad grin. The Suna-nin ducked instinctively as the bird flew at his head, narrowly missing him. Sasori just yanked on the metal cable connecting them, dragging him closer and hoisting him up by the feet. Deidara melted into a clay clone, and from the discarded clay leapt out some sort of four-legged beast with large fangs. Sasori lashed out at it with his cord, slicing it cleanly in two. The resulting explosion only ruffled his hair, but he was too busy searching out his partner to notice.

"What were you saying, oh danna of mine?" Deidara whispered in his ear, and Sasori reflexively spun around and managed to clip his cheek with his fist.

"You are going to learn some respect, Deidara. I will beat it into you if need be." he replied calmly, stabbing him through the chest with one of his so very handy katana. Judging from the blood splatters, this one was the real Deidara. "I missed the vitals, you know."

"But you're still using your poison, yeah." Deidara pulled the blade out of his stomach, wiping his bloody hands off on his uniform. "You think you've won?"

"You said it yourself. I'm still using my poison." Sasori replied with his own grin. He looked down at disdain at the blood on his sandals, wiping it off on the ground.

"Sasori-danna... do you *breathe*?" Deidara asked suddenly. He was serious, though the fact that he was starting to shake from the effects of the poison ruined his solemnity.

Sasori raised an eyebrow. "What kind of question is *that*?"

"Oh well. I guess I'll just find out the easy way, yeah!" Deidara chirped with a cheery smile. He reached up his hand and caught the ankle of his bird, disappearing into the sky before Sasori could catch him.

The redhead then felt two arms wrap around his chest, and he looked back over his shoulder into the blank eyes of the Karura. Deidara's C4 bomb. "Shit." Sasori hissed, just as his partner above shouted.

"*Katsu!*"

-.-.-

Hinata couldn't find any sign of either Deidara or Sasori that evening. She asked all of the members she ran into, but none of them had seen them, either. She even had gone as far as to ask Konan if they'd received a mission in her absence. Alarming, the blunette's answer had been no.

I need to talk to Deidara-kun about that... but if he's not here, then where is he? she asked herself

this question repeatedly, but no answers came out of the shadows. She couldn't even pay attention to what Itachi was saying to her, she was worrying about finding him so much. At least, she hadn't been paying attention to him until he decided to take matters into his own hands.

Then again, she hadn't even been aware that she had been pushing her fingers together until he broke them again. And while Hinata was nursing broken fingers, Itachi decided to ask, "Where is your mind, if it's not on the genjutsu I'm trying to teach you?"

"I-I'm sorry..." she whispered, almost fearfully. She'd almost forgotten about how possessive Itachi was of his time, and how angry he could get if she wasted it. "Sorry, Itachi-senpai."

"...Since you found long-range defensive genjutsu boring, maybe I should liven up the lesson a little?" he asked flatly, though there was a small, devious smile in his eyes. Hinata swallowed, wondering how much more he could scar her before she snapped. "I am going to tell you how to defeat my *Tsukuyomi*."

Her jaw must have hit the floor for how surprised she was. An instant later, she was fearful again, however. *Does this mean he's going to use it on me again?*

"There are two ways that I am aware of." Itachi held up two fingers, closing his eyes solemnly. When he reopened them, he had his Mangekyou Sharingan activated. Hinata's own eyes widened slightly.

"A-Are you going to-to use it on me...?"

"No. I'm not so flippant with my techniques." he said harshly, then sighed. "The first, is to have the Mangekyou Sharingan. But this isn't a guaranteed way to avoid the genjutsu."

Hinata drooped slightly, giving him a withering look. *Of course* that was a way to beat it. But he, Kakashi, and maybe Sasuke were the only ones that that would apply to. There weren't any other Sharingan users left, so it made the information a little useless. For her, at least. "So... is there a guaranteed way to beat it?" she asked dutifully, still frowning at her teacher.

"Yes." Itachi replied lightly. This piqued her curiosity, but she did her best to hide it. No doubt he was enjoying finally having her attention back.

When he didn't speak, though, the dark-haired kunoichi prompted him with a, "...Well?"

"The only foolproof way to beat the *Tsukuyomi*..." he started grandly, and she leaned forward eagerly. Itachi regarded her for a long moment with his red eyes, and Hinata only vaguely realized that she really wasn't afraid of the Sharingan anymore. "...is to not get caught in it."

Hinata let out the breath she'd been holding in a groan. *That's it...?! Even I knew that!* Itachi gave her a look, and she looked down at her lap sullenly. She was not amused. "It's common sense, really..."

"And yet you and countless other Konoha shinobi—who are quite familiar with the Sharingan and its properties—have fallen for the same technique over and over. I wonder why that is." Itachi said icily, kneeling down beside her. Hinata turned away, still a little put-off about his idea of a joke.

"Hyuuga, I am trying to help you. What would your clan say if I told you how to beat an Uchiha at genjutsu?"

"I would say that you are pulling my leg." After a brief pause, she added, "And I would say that I am no longer affiliated with that... clan." Hinata would have used several adjectives she'd learned in her time with the Akatsuki to describe them, but she had a feeling that the Uchiha would have a

little too much fun with that.

"And then you'd be wrong." Itachi stood up with a swirl of his cloak, once again keeping her eyes glued on his own. "You are a Hyuuga, no matter what you say or do or think. The only way to change what the word 'Hyuuga' is is to eliminate the shinobi who *aren't* what you think the clan is."

"...Is that what you did with the Uchiha?" Hinata asked. She couldn't resist, even if it'd earn her a beating later on. Something about Itachi—perhaps the fact that he was a fellow Konoha-nin—just sparked these rebellious and insolent thoughts and remarks.

"...Not quite. My reasons weren't nearly as shallow." he said slowly, with the closest thing to a sneer she'd ever seen on his face. Hinata tried to maintain an uninterested façade, but as a Hyuuga she had barely known anything that wasn't horribly biased about the Uchiha massacre. And it was more than her life was worth to ask Sasuke or Itachi.

"You were saying how to beat an illustrious Uchiha at genjutsu?" she prompted meekly. She smiled shyly, wondering if it was safe to return to the topic at hand.

Itachi shrugged nonchalantly. Then he raised one hand, and tapped a single finger to his temple. She didn't get it, until he remarked, "The eyes. Without these eyes of ours, we can't cast genjutsu without hand signs. And then it's just who is faster as a ninja. And another advantage regular genjutsu has over the Sharingan variety is that the victim doesn't need to be looking into your eyes."

"But... I'm not nearly as fast as you or Sasuke-san—or even Kakashi. Doesn't that make the tip worthless?" Hinata asked. She wasn't nearly as disappointed as the last time, however.

"I think... you're underestimating yourself. You should be roughly a jounin by now, if only for your genjutsu skills. If you worked on your speed and caught one of us by surprise... it could be interesting."

"You're a little masochistic, aren't you?" the kunoichi asked before she could stop herself. Mentally she berated herself for being so flippant with her superior, especially one who broke her bones on regular occasions. Her fingers gave a painful little throb to remind her of that fact.

But before she could feel Itachi's wrath, there was a knock at the door. Hinata turned eagerly to see that her savior was Konan. The woman looked slightly ill, if one of her arms clutching her stomach wasn't sign enough. Itachi raised an eyebrow, asking with mild concern, "What's wrong?"

"You and Kisame-san have a mission..." Konan said wearily, closing her eyes. Hinata wondered if she was coming down with something, or even if it was that time of the month. (Gods knew that she had a rough time of it.)

"I meant what is wrong with you, Konan-san?" At least Itachi had the tact to act somewhat sympathetic. He strolled over and retrieved the mission scroll, and looked pointedly at the second scroll she was carrying.

"This is for Hinata-san. I can't find either Deidara or Sasori, so could you please give this to them? It's a mission for them as well." Hinata hastily got up and relieved the poor woman of the scroll, freeing her other arm to wrap itself around her stomach.

"What's wrong, Konan-senpai?" she asked, with much more worry than Itachi had mustered. He looked a little peeved to be ignored, especially when Konan answered her.

"Nothing, I think it's just the flu... all the snow is melting, and all the moisture in the air is probably messing with me. It's nothing." Hinata wondered if it was genuinely the answer, or if it was an excuse. She put one arm around the taller kunoichi's shoulders, leading her out the door. Itachi nodded goodbye to them both, a little stiffly, and departed in the other direction.

"Why don't you rest if you're not feeling well?" Hinata asked quietly.

"Just because I have a stomachache doesn't mean I'll become a liability to this organization." Konan replied curtly, standing up a little straighter. Hinata got the hint and let go of her, clasping her hands in front of her. "I've already vomited, so I can't get sick again. I'll be fine."

Typical ninja behavior, but as the blunette Akatsuki member left, she couldn't help but feel sorry for her nonetheless. Hinata sighed, looking down at Deidara's mission scroll. Now she'd *have* to find him. But how would she break such a delicate question to him, as to what he thought of her? *Ugh... men. Why do they have to be so complicated?*

Hinata decided to head back to her room, first, and get some ointment. She had already healed her broken fingers, but one of the bones had broken the skin, and healed or not she didn't want an infection. It was much better to be safe than sorry. The heiress just had to keep repeating to herself that she wasn't stalling.

A surprise was waiting for her when she opened the door to her room, however. A neat little wrapped box, complete with a purple bow on top. Curiously, she read the tag. It only said 'Happy Belated Birthday, princess', and nothing more. "Who is this from...?" she murmured, a little confused but also somewhat delighted. It was thoughtful of whoever it was to leave this for her.

As she delicately unwrapped it, Hinata tried to figure out who it would be from. None of the Akatsuki had been gone during her birthday, and she'd already received gifts from most of them. She seriously doubted that the ones who didn't give something to her suddenly would, either. The only other person who knew when her birthday was would have been Sasuke, but she hadn't seen him for several months. And there was no way he would have snuck into Amegakure just to give her a present.

Someone knocked on her door, and she jumped. Turning around, Hinata called, "C-Come in!" while she hastily stowed the partially unwrapped present under the blanket. Tobi peeked his head in the room, looking around.

"Is Deidara-san in here?" he asked, as if the Iwa-nin would jump out and surprise him.

"No, he's not... No one's seen him. Do you have a message for him, Tobi-chan?" she asked politely, gesturing for him to come in. The masked ninja obliged and shut the door behind him, swinging his arms at his sides.

"Yeah... sorta."

"...Sorta? How can you sort of have a message for someone?" she asked in confusion.

Tobi just flounced over to sit beside her, instantly finding the present with a gasp of awe. "Ehh? What's this, Hinata-chan? Do you have a secret admirer?!" She blushed and shook her head furiously. "Who is it from?"

"I-I don't know... I just found it in my room, on my pillow." she said, watching with amusement as he started playing with the bow. Tobi put it on his head, then decided against it, and instead stuck it to the top of her hair.

"It matches your hair better. What is the present? Is it cool?" the black-haired shinobi asked eagerly. Hinata smiled at his enthusiasm; if he was like this normally, what did he act like when he got his *own* presents?

"I haven't opened it yet, silly."

"...Can I open it?" She had seen the question coming, but she couldn't resist him. He was so cute sometimes, like a little puppy or a small child. She giggled and handed it over, watching as he tore into the paper like he was ten years younger. Once he opened the box, he turned it over and dumped its contents on the bed gracelessly.

"I hope there was nothing breakable..." she murmured, still trying hard not to laugh at his antics. How someone so... happy could get into the Akatsuki was beyond her. Even Deidara had slowly been growing darker since joining. Maybe Tobi was insane.

"It's a bunch of bottles and stuff. It looks girly, Hinata-chan..." he whined, sifting through the things.

Hinata picked up the nearest bottle, surprised—and more than a little pleased—to see that it was a very nice-smelling exfoliating cream. "You know, Tobi-chan, I *am* a girl... I like girly things."

Tobi dropped the bottle he was holding with a dramatic gasp. Hinata wasn't sure if he was joking or not, but it made her laugh regardless. "But... this is the kind of stuff Konan-san would like! These are very girly and for delicate girls."

Hinata didn't quite know how to react to that. Was he alluding to the fact that she wasn't delicate—or feminine—or that Konan was overly girly? "Tobi-chan, I like girly things. Is there something wrong with that?"

He stared at her for a long moment, and she could envision the face behind the mask slowly coming to a dawning realization. Or maybe he was blushing. "...I didn't mean it like that! Tobi didn't mean to insult the princess, Tobi's sorry!" He shook his head wildly, putting his hands up innocently. Judging from his voice, he was definitely blushing. "Maybe it's just that hime-chan spends so much time with us and not Leader-sama that you're just... one of the guys!" Again, Hinata didn't know whether to be insulted or flattered. But the 'princess' nickname was a bit contradictory to being 'just one of the guys'. Not to mention that it was getting a little old...

"U-Um..." She looked down, pretending to inspect one of the other bottles. Moisturizing cream, and it smelled heavenly.

Before she could change the subject, Hinata felt herself yanked forward by the shoulders and crushed against his chest with no more than a terrified squeak and a blush. "Poor hime-chan, Tobi is so sorry! Hime-chan must be so lonely and must feel so sad with no other female company! Tobi didn't mean to make hime-chan mad, or hurt her feelings, or do anything bad, Tobi swears!" After a long, semi-awkward pause, he commented with amusement, "Hinata-chan blushes all the way up to her hair."

With that, she pushed herself away from him, trying to return her face to normal coloration through sheer willpower. Judging from his laughter, it wasn't working. "F-First you s-say I'm not feminine, an-and then you talks about m-my blush!" she said with as much anger as she could muster. It wasn't much.

Still, Tobi calmed down, mostly to smooth her ruffled feathers. "I didn't mean to offend you, Hinata-chan." he said, quite seriously. "It's just that you've become quite familiar with many of the

men of the organization and you've lost the frightened, meek air that you first had. Most of us treat you as a friend, not a princess." Hinata forgave him, but she couldn't help but wonder if Deidara's fairytale about her had become a running joke.

"It's fine... I guess I was just a little surprised to, umm... find out that I'd become that casual with you all." She sat back down beside him, sighing. Tobi picked up a bottle of lotion, somehow sniffing it from behind his mask.

"Can I have some?" he chirped.

"You said they were girly just a minute ago. Do you want to be girly, Tobi-chan?" she asked solemnly. He appeared to think, just as seriously.

"...Yes. It smells good."

"You'd have to take off your gloves, you know."

Tobi paused, for some reason she couldn't fathom. Surely taking off his gloves wouldn't be that much of a feat? "...Nevermind then. Tobi will be fine without it, so I'll see you, Hinata-chan!"

Tobi flounced out of her room, leaving her alone with her gifts. Lotion, some moisturizer, a really nice exfoliating cream, and some body wash. Not something she'd expect to get from someone in Amegakure, but she wasn't complaining. Things in her arms, mission scroll neglected on her bed, Hinata decided to go pamper herself a little with a long, hot bath. Whoever gave her these nice things had her gratitude.

Only after she was getting into the water did she realize that Tobi left without telling her the message.

Oh well... I'm sure Deidara-kun will get back soon, and then I can give him his mission scroll, too. I wonder where we'll be going this time... she thought dreamily, sinking down into the soothing water. One good thing about their move to Ame was that they never ran out of hot water for her occasional bath.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Deidara and Sasori return to the normal world, a little worse for wear but at least on speaking terms once more. Hinata addresses the issue of their relationship, but doesn't get quite as far as she'd like. Instead Neji takes over. Only now they face the threat of the outside world, for the first time in nearly a year. A familiar face appears, and bonds are tested and forged.

A Change of Positions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That night, Deidara—and Sasori—still weren't back. No one had seen them all day, and the only remark anyone made was that they had a mission waiting for them. Hinata didn't know whether or not to look at the scroll, just in case it was something important. Though if it were really that important, surely the leader would have had some better way of giving them said mission than through the Hyuuga girl.

There was a worse problem that night, though, much as Hinata would hate to admit it. She missed Deidara, but she also found out that she missed sleeping with him. Mostly he was warm (the tower was quite cold, especially since spring was only just starting to fight against winter's grasp now), but he also kept her dwindling nightmares placid. She had been slowly getting over them, having less and less, and the ones that she did have were of less intensity.

But her discussion with Itachi about the *Tsukuyomi* and the Sharingan seemed to bring back the memories to her mind.

She had been asleep only for a few minutes before she jolted back awake, trying to convince herself that a red-eyed version of her cousin was *not* trying to kill her. Hinata could tell right off the bat that she wasn't going to get much sleep like this, and decided, for once, to *do* something about it.

So thus she grabbed Deidara's blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders, and set out to do something. The main problem was that she didn't know what to do. She briefly thought about going to see Konan, but if the older woman was sick, then she needed her rest. And not be woken up at one in the morning.

Neji would have thrown a fit if she appeared on his doorstep complaining of the persistent nightmares, and most likely would try to kill Itachi. Which wouldn't be a good plan. And Hinata would have gone to Tobi—he could cheer *anyone* up—but she had no idea as to where his room in the tower was.

After walking around the entire floor several times, and not getting nearly tired enough to ignore memories of the *Tsukuyomi*, Hinata discovered that if she wanted some sort of closure, she would have to see Uchiha Itachi himself. But no doubt he wouldn't be very happy to see her, considering the time and her flippancy towards him earlier.

Hinata made her way to Itachi's room slowly, dragging her feet. She didn't want to do this, really, but psychologically she really should see the cause of the problem if she wanted it to stop. Too few minutes later, the sleepy, dark-haired girl found herself in front of his door. Hinata hoped that he wouldn't be too grumpy about being woken up by her, of all people.

"What the fuck are *you* doin' up?" Hinata must have jumped a foot in the air, though she was much too surprised to scream. Trying to get her heartbeat back under control, she turned fearfully to see Hidan leaning casually against the wall behind her. His arms were crossed and he was missing his rosary, but he didn't seem overly angry at seeing her in the middle of the compound in the dead of night.

"I-I was just seeing Itachi-senpai..." She gestured to the door, keeping her other hand clamped

tightly on the blanket. *How* had he managed to sneak up on her like that! Sure, he was a ninja, but she was too.

Hidan raised both eyebrows, and Hinata blushed when she realized the implications of her words. "Ohh, I hadn't thought that Uchiha was fuc—"

"He's not!" she said in a high voice, burying her face in the black fabric of the blanket. "We-We're not! Itachi-senpai is-is just my genjutsu teacher, an-and he doesn't even like me!"

"Yeah, yeah, 'genjutsu'." Hidan laughed at her. "The *Tsukuyomi* can induce a damn seventy-fucking-two hours of real physical sensations. That's a long time for such shit. I guess he's got quite the stamina, right?"

Hinata decided that she definitely preferred facing a grumpy, sleepy Itachi to Hidan. "Um... excuse me, b-but I have to be going..." she said faintly, turning her burning face away from him. He was such a jerk sometimes. No, he went beyond 'jerk'. Way beyond.

"Seriously, what's the rush? Unless you wanna have some shitty midnight escapades with Uchiha, I don't see why you're in such a damn rude hurry to get rid of me." He stepped across the hallway to lean on the wall beside her, so she couldn't so easily ignore his magenta gaze. After a brief pause, in which she was too flustered to reply properly, he had the tact to ask, "Something wrong? You have some pretty nasty bags under your eyes. So busy you don't even have time to sleep?"

"No—nightmares." she said sullenly, turning to glare at him. Hidan could have his moments, but this definitely wasn't one of them.

"Why aren't you wearing your rosary? You trying to be a fucking heathen again? You ain't gonna save your godless soul if you don't keep prayin'." he said suddenly, looking down at her conspicuously bare neck. She hastily brought up the blanket to cover herself. "You know, if you tightened it a bit, it could cover those scars."

"Are you trying to make conversation, or do you just like trying to repeatedly convert me?" she asked, resigning herself to humoring him. Looking down at his sleep shirt, she noticed that his beaded necklace was also missing. "Where's *yours*?"

"I don't sleep with mine on. Big 'duh' for the ditzy bitch. I've woken too many times with a bead stuck in my eye, thank you very fucking much." the albino replied primly, giving her a withering look. "You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer the other one of mine." Hinata shot back evasively, avoiding eye contact.

"I ain't trying to convert you anymore. By all rights, you *are* a follower of Jashin-sama." He grinned evilly, leaning in until he was a sparse few inches from her face. "When we were in the Cloud, after the Raikage stabbed you and you were dyin', I gave you the Jashinist's last rites. You're converted by default."

Hinata sighed, taking a step backward to preserve her personal space. "...Right. Great."

"So keep wearing your rosary if you want Jashin-sama to salvage your slutty soul." He folded his hands behind his head, watching in obvious amusement as she turned bright red. "What? Can you hardly blame me? Half the damn organization thought you were sleeping with Deidara when you first came. ...Hell, half still do."

"*What!*" she asked incredulously. She was fairly certain she passed by red and turned violet.

Hidan laughed at her again. She was beginning to notice that while his laughter definitely wasn't kind, it was a little bit nicer than when he was *really* making fun of her. "Okay, it's a lie. Jashin-sama save my fucking soul and forgive my sins. Obviously you're a prude, and Deidara's probably too clueless to fuck you. I think he's going gay for Sasori, anyway, that little shit."

Hinata glared at him, crossing her arms. "You're cruel. You shouldn't say such things, Hidan-san, otherwise Jashin might think you're a pathological liar and send you to hell."

Hidan just grinned at her, his eyes glinting mysteriously. "If you haven't realized it yet, we're already *in* hell." While she was trying to figure out a proper retort to the remark, he slung an arm around her shoulders and turned her around from Itachi's door. "Look, let me make it up to you."

"No." She could guess at what he was getting at.

"Okay, fine then. Be a fucking virgin for the rest of your life, you prude." he grumbled, rolling his eyes. "I was just gonna give you some Jashin-damn *advice*. You're too paranoid, and I hope you get raped one day so you can loosen up a bit."

Hinata, with an indignant gasp, shoved him away as roughly as she could. "You—that's a horrible thing to wish for!"

"Then get a boyfriend already. Or go lesbian with Konan. Do *something*; you're a boring little bitch." Hidan didn't appear fazed, either way. "Do you want the damn advice or not?"

She glowered at him, wondering which genjutsu to put him under.

"Look, all shinobi have nightmares. It ain't an uncommon thing. And an innocent little freak like you shouldn't have anything too devilish to deal with. I know how to deal with nightmares." The immortal stood his ground, and even without the usual scythe and blood covering him, he still looked like a formidable opponent.

Hinata suspiciously regarded him, weighing her options. True, this is what she had been hoping for, but she hadn't been hoping for it from Hidan of all the people in Amegakure.

"I'm not a fucking idiot, you know. Don't you think that I'd have a few dealings with horrific mental trauma and some bloody scenes? I'm the oldest member of this heathen organization, and Jashin-sama save my soul, I have some experience to back it up, you know." he added, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

And that was how Hinata found herself in the kitchen, eating a bowl of ice cream while getting therapy from a mass murdering, blood-loving Jashinist.

-.-.-

Deidara appeared back in the hideout with no fuss. He was sporting several cuts and bruises, and he was walking with a limp, but no one questioned his or Sasori's absence. In fact, aside from one remark from Hidan, no one appeared to really care.

Hinata cared, though. She acted a little reserved at first, but after just an hour she was sticking to him like glue.

He just made up some excuse that he was 'training' to satisfy her curiosity. Which was true, technically; surely fighting with Sasori would be counted as such. But mostly he had wanted to test out whether or not Sasori would be affected by his C4. It was somewhat based off of Hidan and Kakuzu's fighting style, and he doubted that the redhead would like to know that, but it was handy to know that he could use his most powerful weapon and not harm his partner in the least.

Though he had gotten the beating of his life for the knowledge.

But Deidara would willingly pay the price again, especially since Sasori seemed to be talking to him again. Hinata picked up on this instantly, and treated him civilly enough, but he didn't miss the glares she shot him when she thought he wasn't looking. For some unknown reason, he felt a little pleased when Sasori shot glares back, amused that they were fighting over something as petty as himself.

It ruined his happy mood when she gave him the mission scroll, though. It made it worse when Sasori snatched it from him without giving him a chance to read it.

"What is it, Sasori-danna!" Deidara whined, trying to read over the shorter nin's shoulder. Sasori just moved away from him, but Deidara followed him. It continued on like that for several minutes, before the blonde caught the word 'interrogation' on the paper and had to ask about it. "Interrogating someone? Who, yeah? Do we get to kidnap someone?"

Hinata cleared her throat, giving him a look.

Deidara just looked back at her, then amended, "Kidnap someone... purposely? Yeah?"

"No, nothing so exciting." Sasori, evidently done reading it, tossed the scroll over his shoulder and crossed his arms. Hinata bent to pick it up, quickly scanning over it. "We're just to interrogate some of the immigrant ninja. See if we can root out any spies."

"...Oh." Deidara's face fell and he sighed. "Oh well, at least it'll be interesting to see what kind of freaks we attract, right, Bya-chan?"

"U-Um..."

"...Deidara, why don't *you* read the scroll?" Sasori suggested mildly. Hinata handed it to him silently, looking down at her sandals.

He scanned down, eyes instantly picking out the word 'Hyuuga'. "'Note'... 'do not take the Hyuuga with you. The ninja of this village and their interviews will be confidential and will be shared only with myself or Konan.' Why doesn't he want Bya-chan to come with us, yeah?"

"Because. Obviously, he doesn't trust her as implicitly as you seem to do, and frankly it's none of her business what refugees Amegakure is taking in. Any Suna-nin we'd get wouldn't recognize me, and the same is likely for any Iwa-nin coming in. But the risk of a Konoha-nin recognizing her and causing a scene is high." Sasori replied, taking the scroll from his partner and sliding it into his sleeve. "And thanks to the late start we got, we only have an hour before we have to report down to the village gates. Lucky us."

"This is going to be boring, yeah..." Deidara pouted, crossing his arms. The only upside was that this mission should only last a few hours at the most, and it was in-city.

"I-I'll just meet up with you later?" Hinata ventured, almost shyly. He grinned at her, ruffling her hair.

"Yeah. See you then, Bya-chan." She nodded as he turned to leave, and he only gave a passing thought as to what she might do with her suddenly free afternoon.

"W-Wait." He felt a tug on his uniform's sleeve, and turned back with raised eyebrows.

"Hm?"

"...Deidara-kun, can I... talk with you?" Hinata's colorless eyes flickered over to Sasori for a brief moment, but Deidara didn't miss it. "Privately?"

He was at a blank as to what would have brought this on, so only looked over his shoulder. "I guess I'll be there in a few minutes, yeah." Sasori shrugged and shut the door behind him as he departed.

He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms skeptically. Her whole body radiated tenseness and she was fidgeting to the point of twitching. She paced back and forth a few times, wringing her hands, glancing at him every few seconds. Deidara was losing his patience, and wondered vaguely if anything was wrong.

"Deidara-kun..." she started. He nodded, but slumped when she didn't speak again for another five minutes.

Looks like he'd have to jumpstart this conversation. By now, he was actually worried that something *was* wrong, too. Taking a deep breath, he finally worked up the nerve to ask, "...Is—"

"Doyoulikeme?" She broke in suddenly, turning to face him with a kind of desperate panic. Her eyes were screwed shut and she was shaking slightly. Deidara hadn't even caught what she had said; how was he supposed to reply?

"Eh?" It wasn't the most eloquent response, but it worked.

Hinata opened her eyes, shrinking back a little. Her face slowly darkened to a delicate pink, and somehow she managed to repeat, "Do you like me?" with a straight face.

Deidara resisted the urge to bang his head against the nearest wall. "Is that what this is about? Of *course* I like you, Bya-chan, yeah. You're one of my best friends. Was Sasori-danna telling you shit about me, yeah? I swear I'll throttle the little egotist..."

The pink dipped a few shades into a pretty magenta. "N-No... th-that's not wh-wha-what I meant..."

He turned back from his assassination plans with a kind of blank surprise. "Huh? It's not?" She shook her head, shutting her eyes tightly again. Deidara set his chin in his hand to try to think, but gave it up as a bad job when the tongue on his palm kept trying to lick him. "Wait a second... this isn't one of those girl things where you think no one likes you, is it? 'Cause you're really pretty, yeah, and you shouldn't listen to anyone tell you otherwise."

He put a hand on her shoulder, and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. She just gave him a deer in the headlights look in answer. The Iwa-nin's face fell; what was he supposed to do here? Pull the answer she was looking for out of a hat?

Hinata took a bracing breath, and got that 'must-act-like-a-kunoichi' expression on her face. Deidara didn't know whether to be amused or scared. "I-I meant... do you like me... romantically?"

"...Oh." He hurriedly pulled his hand away from her shoulder, standing at attention nervously. Why did it suddenly feel warmer in there? He was aware that he was probably blushing, and at the rate she was hyperventilating, she would probably pass out soon. The best bet was to give her whatever answer she was looking for, and quick. Never mind if it was a lie.

The problem was, looking down at the petite girl, that he couldn't *tell* which answer she was looking for. Did she have some sort of crush on him? Deidara mentally damned the Stockholm Syndrome to hell several times over. Or was she hoping that he *didn't* like her in that sense?

So he fielded the question. "Why, yeah?" he asked guiltily, hating that he had to resort to stalling until he figured out what he was up against.

Unfortunately, Hinata must have mistook his guilty tone for the answer she wasn't looking for. She made an odd little sound, like someone kicked her puppy, and pitched forward into his arms in a dead faint.

"Sasori-danna... isn't going to like that I'm late, yeah." he announced to the unconscious girl as he hauled her up into his arms better. Deidara carried her out into the hall, looking for some place to put her that she preferably wouldn't hit him for. Who could take care of a fainted girl while he was trying to pacify his partner? He shifted her so that he was carrying her bridal style, tapping his foot impatiently while he thought.

Who wouldn't be mad that he dumped an unconscious Hinata with them? Or, rather... who already hated him enough that it didn't matter?

Half an hour later, Deidara was dodging kunai as he shouted out a hasty explanation for Neji. He managed to get away from him long enough to use a *Shunshin* (though he took a kunai to the shoulder for his troubles). Unfortunately, it appeared that he just jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Sasori *really* hated to be kept waiting, it seemed.

"—and I've already gone through *half* of the shinobi, you little bratty shit, and you'll be lucky if I don't eviscerate you myself."

"Eviscerate, that's a new threat, yeah." Deidara said, blocking Sasori's fist with the kunai he pulled out of his shoulder. The Kiri-nin they were supposed to be interrogating watched with a mixture of horror and delight. "Sasori-danna, don't we have a job to be doing—"

"—like *you* would know—"

"Okay then!" Deidara hastily stood up, stepping nervously away from Sasori. He grinned at the immigrant, trying to ignore the killer intent coming from behind. (Shinobi rule whatever: don't turn your back to anything with that much killer intent. Or basic instincts, whichever.) "So you're a Kiri-nin. Do you know Kisame?"

"Not... personally?" the boy replied, grinning back. He had sharpened teeth like a Kiri ninja, at least.

"Do you have a death wish against any Akatsuki member, yeah?"

"Not... really?" he said uncertainly, confusion clearly written in his red eyes. Deidara walked over to him, tilting back the chair he was sitting in. The boy squawked indignantly, but the blonde ignored him, peering into his eyes. "Um—"

"I don't see three pupils. It isn't the Sharingan, yeah." Deidara let go of him, and he thudded back to the floor loudly. "Okay, name, age, rank, and you're good to go!"

"That's *not* how this is supposed to go!" Sasori stood up, punching the wall beside him fiercely. It was hard to tell who was more scared, Deidara or the Kiri-nin. "You are missing the point *completely*, you dolt."

"I'm speeding things up. Do you really think that *this* kid could do much harm? Now that one Grass ninja I saw out there, I don't like the looks of him—"

"How old are you?" Sasori interrupted, leveling his brown glare on the unfortunate immigrant-wannabe. He obviously didn't look like he had been expecting this much trouble.

"Seventeen...?"

"Need I remind you that I was a missing-nin by twelve, Deidara?" Sasori asked rhetorically, pointing at the boy to prove his point.

"Yeah, and I was one by ten. What's your point, yeah?" he replied in question, giving him a flat look. "Obviously this kid would have to be a missing-nin if he's trying to transfer into Amegakure. *Duh*, danna." Cheerfully he turned back to face the seventeen-year-old, yet again ignoring the surge in murderous intent behind him. "Okay, name and rank, yeah."

"D-Daisuke. Ikari Daisuke, and I'm a jounin." He looked over Deidara's shoulder nervously at the furious Suna-nin, obviously not daring to comment on his precarious position.

"Okay, good to go—"

"Hardly!" Sasori spat, yanking Deidara backwards by the ponytail. He pinned him up against the wall, scowling darkly. "You are treating this as a *joke*. Not only do you show up *late*, but you're not even trying! You need to take things seriously once in awhile, brat."

"I am taking this seriously, yeah." Deidara replied in a hurt voice, pouting. Sasori hit him on the top of the head, giving him a shove.

"I hope Leader-sama finds a suitable punishment for slacking when we're done here." Sasori hissed, and then turned to the immigrant. He straightened, trying to look like he hadn't been watching their argument with interest. "You are free to go, welcome to Amegakure, etc. Please turn out to be some sort of psychotic mass murderer so I can rub it in my partner's face later."

The Kiri-nin stood up, edging out of the door, trying hard not to laugh. Deidara rolled his eyes, sticking out all three tongues at Sasori. "You're just mad. 'Cause I don't act like I have a stick up my ass all the time, yeah. Lighten up, Sasori-danna."

The redhead sighed heavily, sitting back down and pointedly ignoring the remarks. "Just... send the next ninja in."

"Roger, yeah!" Giving him a mock salute, Deidara marched out of the room to pick the next victim.

-.-.-

Neji was retrieving his kunai from the walls and door when Hinata awoke. He turned to spare her a curious glance, asking, "Did the fight wake you?"

She just slowly sat up, pulled her knees to her chest, and set her cheek on her arms. "...He-He didn't answer me."

"Hm?" He put the knives back into his pouch, turning around to face her better. "What was that about?"

"I... asked Deidara-kun if he liked me. I-I made such a fool of myself..." Now, Neji had known Hinata for her whole life, and he knew when she was about to cry. This was one of those times. Acting quickly to stem the impending flood, so to speak, he stepped over and sat beside her.

"You said he didn't answer your question. How could you make a fool of yourself if he never replied?" he asked quietly. She sighed minutely, sadly. Neji decided to change tactics. "I'm sorry. It was selfish of me to imply that Deidara-san had anything but a friendly relationship with you, Hinata-sama."

She didn't say anything, and Kisho came over to investigate. Neji picked the cat up and set him on his cousin's lap, where she hugged the unfortunate feline quite tightly. Kisho just shed, looking a little grumpy.

Unable to think of anything else to say, Neji stood up quite abruptly. He held out his hand to her, smiling slightly. "Come on. Let's take a walk, you need to get your mind off such petty things."

Hinata looked up at him, absently petting Kisho. Her colorless eyes seemed torn, but finally she relinquished her hold on the grey cat and took his hand. "Alright..." He pulled her to her feet, ushering her out the door while trying to not trip over the cat. Kisho shot him a murderous glare for taking away his source of warmth and affection, but Neji ignored the cat and just shut the door behind him and joined his cousin out in the rain.

"Do you want to go to your tea shop?" he asked slowly, glancing up at the grey sky. It was pouring out, as always, and he didn't have his umbrella with him. (He had actually lost it, not that he'd admit it to any living soul.)

"No... let's just walk in the rain." she said softly, stepping out into the raindrops. She glanced back at him with a shy smile, still looking as though she was about to cry. Neji grimaced, and colds be damned, he joined her.

They walked aimlessly through puddles and mud, watching the passerby. She sniffed, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. "...I am sorry. I hadn't meant to put any sort of pressure on you." Neji said stiffly, looking around for the nearest concrete wall to bang his head against. Why was it her, *her* of all people who was one of the few who could make him feel guilty? Ninja weren't supposed to feel guilt! And all he had done was create a circumstance which almost made her cry...

"No, it-it needed to be done, really... I don't want to ruin my friendship with Deidara-kun if there are hidden feelings." she said pleasantly, looking up at him with raindrops dripping off of her bangs. He wasn't sure if she was crying or not, and she had probably intended it that way.

"I'm sorry." he repeated lamely, looking away. Sometimes he couldn't help but feel a tiny stab of resentment for the Main House for creating this little angel and putting her under the protection of a man like himself...

She wrapped herself around one of his arms, leaning her head casually on his shoulder. The brunette raised an eyebrow, wondering if she was cold or just wanted physical contact with someone. Still, he didn't feel her shivering, so he couldn't bring himself to ask. They meandered down the muddy street, ignoring the rain and the other ninja casually.

"He's my best friend, you know." Her voice jarred him out of his silence, and it took him a moment to figure out that she was talking about Deidara. Again. Hinata turned and smiled warmly up at him, continuing, "I suppose I'm just afraid of how it will damage our relationship if it turns out that he *does* like me..."

"Hm." he grunted noncommittally. He didn't like the blonde, it was no secret, but he wasn't going to stop her from talking. She was the type of kunoichi who could usually straighten out inner turmoil verbally.

She seemed to sense this, but continued on. If gratefully. "I mean... he's not like anyone I've ever known before. He doesn't have any of those shinobi ideals that everyone else seems to think he needs, and he just doesn't want to grow up... H-He's a little like N-Naruto, really... just a little..."

He definitely didn't miss the absent '-kun', which she had been referring to him with for the past eight or nine years. Neji couldn't help but wonder when that happened. *Did something happen concerning Naruto...?* If so, he just added him to his growing list of 'people to maim because they hurt Hinata'. Just in case.

"And he is always looking out for me..." She had a rather dreamy look on her face, but she lost it when she noticed his expression. The heiress quickly amended, "I-I mean, you have been too, but you're kind of... *supposed* to... and he just does it be-because he's actually rather chivalrous..."

"And I'm not?" Far from angry, he was actually amused as she scrambled to fix her slip. "I had always thought that I was polite enough—"

"You—You are!" Hinata said hastily, coloring. "You always have been, I-I just guess I'm a little more used to you and your kindness, but Deidara-kun s-seems to go out of his way to make me happy-not that you don't! I-I mean... I'm sorry, Neji-kun. I just mean that Deidara-kun did so *before* he even knew who I was..."

Neji... kun? That's new, too, he thought, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. She wasn't looking at him, so the jounin couldn't tell if it was accidental or on purpose. *So Naruto has lost his title and I've gained it... interesting*. True, Deidara was also given the same treatment, but this was the first time he'd been called by anything other than 'niisan' by her. (Or the brief pause they went through when neither of them used suffixes.)

Hinata rambled on, oblivious to his train of thought. "He's just... like some sort of weird knight. L-Like Naruto used to... he was... He would have been the white knight in shining armor, and Deidara used to be some kind of dragon, kidnapping the princess..." Neji didn't know where those terms came into play, but he had a sinking suspicion that they had to do with the Iwa-nin's fairytale. "...and he turned out to be some kind of dragon-knight instead."

"If Naruto would be the white knight and Deidara is the dragon of your little tale, who would I be?" he asked, partially in amusement and partially because he was genuinely curious.

Hinata turned to face him, smiling coyly. "Maybe you're another evil dragon who wants to kidnap the princess."

He tried to look offended. "And maybe the princess is just having a little too much fun with her dragons. What ever happened to your lovesick kunoichi syndrome?" he retorted with a smirk. She instantly blushed, hiding her face behind her wet hair.

"O-Okay... fine... Maybe you're a knight, too."

"But not your white knight." He kept his voice carefully neutral, but he couldn't help feeling a little left-out with the entire thing.

"No...you're more like... you're too dark to be a white knight, Neji-kun. You're more of a... dark knight, or something. Not a black knight, those are supposed to be evil..."

"Hm, 'dark knight'." It was an amusing title, at least. He'd have to mention it to Deidara next time he saw the bastard. "I think... I'd like that title. The dark knight." *Much better than 'dragon', anyway...*

-.-.-

Hinata couldn't help but feel much more cheered by the time they circled through the town again. Sure, she was soaked, and she was starting to shiver, but it was worth it. Time with Neji always seemed to cheer her up when she was down, though he did little more than grunt occasionally and tease her lightheartedly. But she realized that they would both have to go inside soon, if they didn't want to die of pneumonia. She glanced down at her hands, noting how white the skin was. Get inside fairly soon.

She hadn't ninja-watched all day, too. Glancing around, she saw many more shinobi wearing Ame hitai-ates, though they were quite obviously from different countries. She wondered if immigrants had been forced to abandon their own headbands in favor of the village's. Or maybe the Rain was finally cracking down on letting so many conspicuous missing-nin roam about the city.

As they neared the hotel he was (still) staying in, Hinata caught glance of something that made her heart skip a beat. She did a double take, just taking in the black hair and red eyes the first time. The first thought that popped into her mind was quite simply *Sasuke!* followed by a sudden, uncharacteristic surge of worry for Itachi.

But upon looking again, she saw that it wasn't the younger Uchiha infiltrating the village in search of his brother. The ninja's hair was longer than Sasuke's, and he had a pair of sunglasses perched atop his head. He appeared to be playing with an Ame headband, smirking in obvious amusement at the hitai-ate. This was not Sasuke, but she recognized him after only a few moments of thought.

Hinata felt a sharp spike of chakra just behind her, and looked up to see that Neji had activated his Byakugan. It only confirmed her theory.

The black-haired, red-eyed shinobi also appeared to have felt it, and looked up curiously for its source. The second he saw the telltale dark hair and white eyes, his face broke into a broad, fanged grin. He ran over, waving one arm enthusiastically, calling, "Hey!"

Hinata blinked in surprise as she felt herself pushed aside when Neji stood protectively in front of her. The black-haired boy ran up to them, still beaming. She could feel the tenseness and anger radiating from her cousin; it was nearly palpable. This was precisely what they *hadn't* wanted. Someone had recognized them.

"Wow, so it is true, Hinata-chan. You *are* living in the Rain... along with Neji, I see." the newcomer said brightly, looking coolly past Neji at the shocked kunoichi.

"Sanada." Neji hissed, no doubt giving him one of his best death glares.

"Actually, it's Ikari, here..." His grin turned a little sheepish as he scratched his cheek. "Though there's no need for such formality. Daisuke's fine, you know."

"I-Ikari-san... wh-what are you doing h-here?" Hinata asked, a little meekly. Daisuke was a Konoha ninja... or he had been, at least. Him popping up in Amegakure—especially using a fake last name—was highly suspicious.

"It's just Daisuke. Dai, even." He gave her a disarming smile, which reminded her forcibly of Kurenai. She stepped to Neji's side, but he cut her off again by moving in front of her. She was a little peeved at him, and Daisuke didn't fail to notice. "Do you have a problem with Hinata-chan seeing me, Neji?"

"Why are you in Amegakure?" he replied with a question, ignoring Daisuke's. He looked a little put-out, though held his grin.

Hinata, however, decided not to let Neji do all the talking. It was *she*, after all, who knew more about the situation at hand. "Deidara-kun and Sasori were interrogating the refugees today. Did you meet them? Tall, blonde Iwa-nin and a short redhead who was probably angry with him?"

His scarlet eyes lit up at the names. "Ehh? So it was *the* Deidara! I should have gotten his autograph." he said mournfully, putting on a pout.

Hinata smiled innocently at him, saying, "You're a spy."

Neji instantly moved in front of her, though the kunoichi didn't miss the surprised look he gave her. Instead of replying to the accusation, he just looked at Neji and asked casually, "You seem to be putting yourself between us an awful lot, Neji. Any reason for that?"

"I am just protecting the heir of our clan. A duty you know full well was given to me years ago, Sanada." Hinata tried to get out from behind him, but he effortlessly blocked her each time, much to her annoyance. "Now, are you a spy, like Hinata-sama says?"

"Seems like you're a little to enthusiastic about protecting her, for it to be just a duty... a little more than familial love, eh?" Once again he ignored the charge. By now the kunoichi was full out fighting with her cousin to try to get away from his overprotective actions, which Daisuke watched with amusement. When he didn't get quite the rise from Neji as he'd hoped—though no doubt he earned himself a rather nice glare—the black-haired jounin finally addressed the issue. "You... say I'm a spy. That hurts, Hinata-chan. We've known each other for how many years and you accuse me of being a *spy*?"

"Deidara-kun would never—niisan *please* let me talk!—Deidara-kun would never let another Konoha-nin into the village. You came here under false pretenses, so obviously you have something to hide. The most obvious reason—niisan, *please*!" After she was jostled out of the way one too many times, Hinata huffed, and decided to take a proactive instead of reactive approach. She started forming hand seals, but by the time either jounin could make a move to stop her, she vanished into the ground as if it were made of liquid.

She reappeared behind Daisuke, stepping out of his slight shadow. He caught her kunai with his own and a feral grin. "Looks like Hinata-chan has learned a few tricks. Genjutsu... sounds like the work of Itachi?" A little too late Hinata remembered his own bloodline limit; the Enjigan. A distant cousin of the Sharingan (not unlike how the Sharingan was related to the Byakugan) and that could see though genjutsu almost as quickly as an Uchiha. Oops.

"You came into this village for reasons of your own, but I can't allow you to do anything bad to

Amegakure. We—They—The villagers have come too far to let Konohagakure interfere." she replied evasively, turning on her own Byakugan just in time to see Neji rush Daisuke. He seemed to be expecting it, though, and ducked under his initial strike. Her cousin clipped him in the side with his knee, but the faux Kiri-nin got away before any real damage could be done.

"Do me a favor and don't tell anyone about this little meeting, okay?" Daisuke grinned at them both, giving them a pose vaguely reminiscent of Lee's good guy stance. "No one else needs to know I'm here just yet, mmkay?" With a wink for Hinata, he formed the seals for a *Shunshin*.

That was when Deidara burst out of the rain and caught Daisuke around the shoulders in a flying tackle.

-.-.-

Deidara had finally gotten off duty from that stupid interrogation 'mission'. He had only gotten the satisfaction of chasing a single ninja out of the village—that Grass ninja who looked creepy—and Sasori was constantly staring at him as if his dearest wish was that he was set on fire. Evidently the Suna-nin hadn't 'forgiven' him for showing up late.

And then what happens once he's free again? The very kid that he proclaimed as 'harmless' and the one that Sasori had hoped would turn into some sort of psycho *does* turn out to be one. One fighting with Hinata and trying to disappear.

Too bad Deidara got his hands on him first.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing!" he shouted, pinning the kid—Daisuke or whatever—to the ground with the momentum of his tackle. He wanted to punch the kid's face in for making Sasori right and moreover, for starting a fight with Hinata.

The black-haired Kiri-nin stared up at him, unsure of whether to be afraid of or surprised at the sudden intrusion. "Uhh—"

"Deidara-kun!" Hinata squeaked behind him, and he just barely sent a cursory glance over his shoulder. She was red as a tomato, but he had a feeling that that was merely because she had fainted the last time she saw him. Oh well.

"Was this guy bothering you, yeah?" he asked, turning with an evil grin back to Daisuke below him. One word was all the excuse he needed to murder this idiot who dared make a fool of him in front of Sasori.

"Uh, n-no—he's actually—"

"Hey, am I the only one here who finds this a little cruel? I don't think this is a very good welcome into this crazy village, and frankly I'm disappointed." Daisuke piped up, raising his free hand. "One of the illustrious Akatsuki is already trying to kill me and Hinata-chan was being quite rude. Not an ideal way to greet all of the poor, forsaken refugees."

Unfortunately, at that time Sasori caught up to his partner. The look on his face was clearly torn between laughing his head off—a disturbing mental image as it was—and kicking the Kiri-nin in the head for seemingly taking his sarcastic advice. "...What do we have here?" he asked with a barely restrained snigger. "Is this a mistake on the part of the infamous artist Deidara who thinks

he can do no wrong?"

Daisuke seemed to be able to gather up a retort faster than Deidara, unfortunately for the situation at hand. "I recall that *you* had a hand in letting me into this country. If you really thought he'd screw it up, you shouldn't have let him."

Sasori looked down with distaste at the black-haired boy Deidara was doing little more than sitting on. "I don't see how you're in much of a position to talk, Ikari. Jounin or not, I think it would be wise to hold your tongue right now."

"I'll keep that in mind," he replied solemnly, staring up at him with large, red eyes. He wasn't quiet for a full two seconds before he continued, "I think... If I may say, I think you're just jealous because he's on top of *me*, not *you*."

Then all hell broke loose.

Sasori's face immediately went to his hand with a long-suffering groan, the other reflexively drawing out a summoning scroll. Deidara beat him to the punch, though. Quite literally. Daisuke barely got away from his second strike, using a *Kawarimi* to swap places with a very surprised Hinata, nursing a bloody nose. Deidara pulled his fist back just in time to stop himself from hitting her, and instead jumped off of her and disappeared into the ground like it was no more than a puddle. Daisuke looked around, obviously expecting the same stunt the kunoichi had tried earlier with genjutsu, but Deidara snickered to himself. He *was* an Iwa ninja after all; he could literally disappear into the ground.

He reached up out of the mud, grabbing the nearest pair of ankles and yanking down. The blonde pushed himself back up as he pulled both jounin down, and stood over them with a triumphant smirk. Neji didn't seem terribly amused at the sudden position, especially having been in it before. "That was for earlier, yeah," he said by way of explanation, and then got down on one knee to look at Daisuke. "And as for you, yeah... I think you'll see what happens when you insult a member of *the Akatsuki*."

Daisuke just spat at him. Deidara narrowed his eyes, and then laid an owl an inch before the head sticking up out of the ground. Neji didn't seem terribly amused at that, either. He couldn't help a little inkling of relief from showing on his face when the blue-eyed artist made the sign that released him, turning the pavement around him back into a slushy mud. Deidara even went as far as to hold out a hand to help him up. Neji refused it, instead getting up and looking down at the muddy mess that was his outfit with disdain. "That wasn't necessary."

"Hey! This isn't necessary, either. Can't we talk this out like civilized people?" Daisuke asked, nodding towards the clay owl in front of him.

Neji ignored him, running a hand through his shorter hair to try to get some of the mud out. The rain was helping, albeit a little. "He's a spy, or at least a Konoha-nin. He's probably been masquerading as a Kiri-nin to try to get into the country."

"Ohh, a little *Konoha* ninja, huh?" Deidara's grin turned particularly vicious. With the mere exception of Hinata, he hated *anything* affiliated with that damned village. And it wasn't a secret. "Sasori-danna, how does our group punish spies?"

"We don't, really. Usually they're ours. No one has been stupid enough to try to insert a spy into the group or our village before, so we don't have an official punishment for the crime." Sasori drawled, sitting on top of Hiruko. His body language says he was relaxed, but the fact that he was tapping his fingers on the puppet's head betrayed his tenseness at the situation at hand. Or maybe he just

wanted to stab Daisuke a few hundred times himself. Or watch him writhe with the effects of some choice poison. Or—Deidara shook his head, turning back to the black-haired spy stuck in the ground below him.

"That's not what I was looking for, yeah." he said flatly, glancing out of the corner of his eye to let his partner know that he wasn't pleased with his response. "You're supposed to make up something suitably bloody on the spot."

"I don't do well under pressure." Sasori replied indifferently, rolling his own muddy eyes. "Now hurry up and stop playing with him, damn it. I have better things to do than to wait for you to think of some punishment. Use your Karura or something."

"Karura? Are you nuts, yeah?" Deidara squawked, gesturing wildly in Hinata's general direction. "*She* breathes! The whole village except you breathes! I'm not going to set off a C4 in the goddamn *village*, yeah!"

The redhead gave him a flat, lidded stare. "So then why don't you set off the bomb that you already have *in front* of him?"

His face fell, and instead of turning back to see Daisuke's reaction, he just brought one hand up and muttered, "*Katsu*." The explosion pushed his hair over one shoulder, but while he was fixing his ponytail, Deidara felt a sharp spike of chakra behind him. "Wha—"

"*Damn*, you took forever. I have better things to do than keep up a *Kage Bunshin* to amuse you. Next time, just kill it so the real fight can start, okay?" Daisuke put his head in his hands, grinning in disbelief. "*This* is the power of an Akatsuki?" He looked up through his bangs, still grinning with those sharpened teeth that so characterized the Kiri shinobi.

Unfortunately, his grand re-entrance was interrupted by the two Hyuuga. Either they had a faster reaction time, or they had spotted him earlier and were just waiting. Hinata had gotten onto the rooftop first for some indiscernible reason. But just as she was pulling back her hand, palm-up in the *Juuken* form, for a strike on the surprised spy, Neji caught her other elbow. He used her own momentum against her and swung her back off of the rooftop, where Deidara caught her before she could fall onto the pavement.

The move to put Hinata out of harm's way, however, left him wide-open. Daisuke was making seals for some sort of Suiton, and Neji threw himself into a desperate spin. The *Kaiten* barely arrived in time to block some sort of whip-like water jutsu, which Daisuke was delightfully trying to smash through with. Eventually Neji's jutsu caught up with him, and the whip wrapped itself around his shoulder as he stopped, where he could not get it off.

Like any good Hyuuga, he used it against the red-eyed jounin; he grabbed onto the solidified water and yanked, *hard*. Daisuke practically ran into Neji's attack, and the caged bird skillfully grabbed hold of the arm holding the whip, pushing his chakra into Daisuke's own system. Burning his tenketsu all along his arm, the water whip splashed into the rain and into oblivion. He felt his shoulder go numb, and he dropped that arm, letting no other outward signs show of his potential injury.

Daisuke looked down at his arm, and pushed up his long sleeve to examine the burn marks. Only raw chakra could leave those sort of marks, and he made sure to put on an amazed charade for only Neji's white eyes. "I can see that you've gotten faster. I can hardly feel my arm; it's all tingly. I bet I can't mold any sort of chakra with it, either. That's really cool, Neji." he said solemnly, even dropping his grin to inform him.

By now a crowd of fearful spectators were gathering, and it was obvious that some bystanders were going to get hurt soon if they didn't leave. Deidara left an outraged Hinata in the crowd, telling her in no uncertain terms to stay there. Daisuke saw him coming, though, and dropped down from the rooftop, using the same mass of people to cover him. Neji followed him only a moment later, and Deidara latched onto his signature white shirt and kept him in sight as he pursued. The blonde Akatsuki member hadn't been aware that normal jounin were this fast, these days. Especially darting in and around frightened people.

Shit, where did that little bastard go... if he gets away, I'll never hear the end of it from Sasori. I can't believe that Konohagakure was stupid enough to try this stunt, he thought, with a kind of irritation. He should probably be more angry that he'd been deceived, even if he had done a sloppy job, and even more angry that his own village had been infiltrated. But somehow that seemed to take a backseat to the fact that he was going to make a fool out of himself in front of Sasori and Hinata. (And at the rate civilians were gathering, half the village. Soon another Akatsuki member would probably appear to see what was going on.)

Dodging around an elderly old lady, he finally caught sight of Neji again, who had pinned Daisuke to the ground and was trying to strangle him with his own Kiri hitai-ate. Deidara almost laughed at the spectacle. All amusement was erased from the scene when the darker haired of the two managed to get his hands together for some seals, and from a nearby puddle of water the whip formed once more. With a wild wave of his uninjured arm, the water wrapped around Neji's torso several times.

Then, with another sign and a vicious grin, Daisuke sent a crackle of electricity down the water. Before Neji had more time than to open his mouth in a shout that never came, the electricity hit his soaked body and he fell down limply. Several nearby civilians also went down, the moisture in the air enough to carry a lot of the shock away from the whip itself. It only told of how many volts he crammed into that water. Hinata let out a scream somewhere behind him, and Deidara just knew one thing; the human body was made up of enough water to make that jutsu *very* lethal. The rain and puddles surrounding them didn't help the matter.

The crowd around them departed with a speed that was almost ninja-esque. Daisuke got up, holding the whip limply in one hand, watching indifferently as it crackled when it made contact with a nearby puddle. Deidara stood his ground, and a little too late he saw Hinata run up beside him, Byakugan off and looking frenetic that her cousin had been hit by the jutsu. More on reflex than following any actual thought process, he flung out a hand and stopped her from running to his side. He couldn't tell if Neji was alive or dead, but she didn't need to suffer the same fate, either way.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt your friend?" Daisuke asked with a savage grin, watching them both with wide, slightly manic, eyes. Hinata glared back, from behind the blonde's outstretched arm. "There are going to be a lot more casualties unless you both back off. *Right* now. I'm disappointed in the Akatsuki and this pathetic village. I had such high hopes..." He let his voice fade away almost mournfully, and Deidara wondered for the first time if he had other reasons to come to this village.

"This is not the fault of the Akatsuki, yeah. You're the one who came in here and decided to wreak havoc, and you're already killing off our shinobi." He nodded down to Neji, who still wasn't stirring. Hinata made an odd sound beside him.

Daisuke looked down at the Hyuuga jounin as if he just noticed the body. "I don't think he's dead... otherwise he wasn't as strong as I thought. Why don't you," he turned back to them and nodded towards the kunoichi, "check to see if he's still got a pulse? You're attached to him, Hinata-chan. I couldn't deny you the privilege of sobbing and clinging his body in the rain like some sappy romance novel."

She ducked under Deidara's arm before he could stop her, but he caught the tear-filled glare she sent him. He really hoped she wouldn't cry, though he couldn't bring himself to admit that it would hurt *him* if she cried over *Neji*. Even though she had before... The navy-haired girl rushed to the fallen ninja's side, shakily reaching out with a tentative hand towards his throat, where hopefully the heart was still pushing blood all around his body... Deidara squared his glower on Daisuke, reminding himself how much he hated Neji.

"Get out of the village." he said harshly, studying Daisuke carefully. He said he was a jounin, but he managed to take out Hyuuga Neji and only lost chakra circulation in one arm. And if he was anything like Deidara himself, he should be getting feeling back into the limb in just a few minutes. He seemed to use water jutsu, and unfortunately with the constant rain, there was no shortage of ammo. He could also force a charge through the water. He wasn't a genius for nothing; electricity plus Doton equaled bombs detonating without his control. (At least, he was somewhat sure that his bombs went off when shocked. It had never happened before. Logically, they should...)

So in other words: stay the hell away from that water whip of his.

"Can I have your autograph first?" The sharp-toothed smile was back, though it came with no semblance of innocence this time around. Deidara didn't know how to reply, exactly, especially since Daisuke seemed totally serious about the request. "Then I'll leave, I promise."

"You're not going to leave, yeah." Deidara said shrewdly, narrowing his eyes. He lost the option by promising to. He wished he could close up on this kid's eyes with his scope, but it would be an obvious move and it didn't *seem* like the Sharingan, at least. (Plus, hadn't Itachi killed pretty much all of his clansmen?) "You haven't accomplished anything yet. Why did you infiltrate us just to cause a scene, yeah?"

"A genius of art and logic! How wonderful." Daisuke chuckled good-naturedly as if they weren't trying to stare each other down. "You're a piece of work in and of yourself, aren't you?"

"Don't play games with me, yeah. I'm still faster than you and I have long-range jutsu. You don't." the Iwa-nin observed with a rue grin. "Plus... you're really badly outnumbered, aren't you?"

Daisuke looked around with the air of just noticing this. "Hmm, apparently I am. I could just take a hostage, then. Some civilian, someone who couldn't get away from any sort of attack jutsu."

Deidara flat-out laughed at him, putting one hand on his hip and gesturing with the other. "You don't seem to *get* this, yeah. We're *bad guys*. We don't care if you kill a civilian or two; you'll be dead just as soon as you harm anyone. I just wanna know why you're here, and then we can resolve this like ninja, yeah."

"I was supposed to infiltrate the Rain—and eventually the Akatsuki. I was hired by the Leaf, because of my Mist upbringing it would be much more of a cover than any of their own jounin. 'm supposed to figure out what you guys are up to, you know, why you're pissing off the demons and everything..." he replied nonchalantly, crossing his arms. The water whip crackled and twitched slightly when it hit another puddle. He glanced down at it, then looked back up at Deidara, almost shyly. "So... what *are* you up to?"

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. Even he didn't know the full details of the master plan, but he had at least the option of finding out if he really wanted to. He glanced over his shoulder, back across the street where Sasori was watching him from on top of Hiruko. "It doesn't concern you, yeah. You're gonna die here, anyway, so it's not like you could go back and tell your little Hokage."

"I don't think you quite understand, Deidara, was it?" Daisuke cocked his head to the side, raising an eyebrow. Deidara didn't reply. "But... I don't think you quite understand. I've already taken out a jounin with minimal injuries. I think I can stand up to you in a fight."

"There are ten Akatsuki members, yeah."

"I only see two right now." He nodded over towards the redhead, keeping scarlet eyes locked onto Deidara's own blue grey ones.

"Is that a challenge?" Deidara asked, trying to stop himself from grinning. He was giving this guy a way out (*if* he could outrun him) and the idiot wanted to fight him. It was laughable.

He saw the arm holding the whip lash upward, and he jerked his head to the side on impulse. He felt a whistle by his ear, and a few blonde hairs fluttered down into the puddle at his feet. All the humor was gone from the situation. Scowling, he raised one hand in a seal, the dragon that he had placed earlier in the ground (using the owl as a cover for the movement) bursting up out of the wet cement below Daisuke. The dragon's mouth opened wide and before the black-haired shinobi could offer more than a "Shit!" it snapped its jaws shut with a click of clay teeth. The dragon squirmed and slithered its way out of the ground, stretching its wings languidly, and successfully catching the attention of most of the city.

Deidara looked around guiltily as people—ninja and non-ninja alike, it seemed—fled from the area with shrieks and screams of surprise. With a shrug, however, he sent the dragon into the sky to detonate, no doubt alarming the citizens further but keeping them out of harm's way at the same time. He strolled languidly over to where Hinata was still kneeling beside Neji. Her hands were pale and shaking, though from the cold rain or from grief he couldn't tell.

"...Is he alive, yeah?" Deidara asked, sinking down into a squat beside her. High above them, the dragon exploded, temporarily giving the entire area a strange, eerie light. The boom also made his ears ring. Maybe he should have sent it farther up. Shaking his head to try to clear his head, the blonde nodded down to Neji.

"Y-Yes..." she whispered, tangling her hands anxiously in her cousin's shirt. "He's just having trouble br-breathing." Hinata said softly, obviously trying to keep her voice level.

"Well then, come on. Let's get him out of the rain so he doesn't catch pneumonia on top of it, yeah." Without asking, he picked up the unconscious shinobi, throwing him over his shoulder with little more care than he would a sack of potatoes. Neji was a lot lighter than he'd expected, but Deidara just smiled to himself; it probably meant he could still beat him on sheer strength alone. He wasn't exactly muscular—having the mouth implants in his arms left little room for real muscle mass—but at least he could still outclass him. ...*What am I saying? Why should I, an Akatsuki member, compete with a seventeen-year-old kid?* he thought dejectedly, tempted to drop Neji then and there.

But then Deidara's skin prickled with a sudden surge of electricity in the air. He turned around, eyes widening with a sudden realization, just as his shinobi mind kicked in where his normal one froze. Carrying Neji he couldn't react nearly as fast as normal. And even if he did manage to drop the jounin, it wouldn't give him enough time to block the blow. Worse, while his gaze was fixing itself upon Daisuke's stoic one, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Hinata was still unencumbered.

Daisuke—who had *somehow* evaded the majority of the blast, though his arms were severely burned and his nose was bleeding again—swung back his hand containing the crackling water whip, bringing it back down in a powerful lash, and Hinata was running out in front of him

protectively, and Deidara tried to grab her arm to stop her but his fingers just barely brushed her jacket, missing her—

And then an arm reached up and caught the end of the water jutsu, the static sizzling ominously without a conductor nearby to discharge it. Daisuke landed in a puddle from his jump, looking more angry than surprised at the sudden intrusion. But Sasori stared calmly back at him, looking bored with the whole ordeal. The current in the water did nothing to him, of course. Deidara and Hinata both stared in slight awe at the back of the redheaded man in front of them. Who had just saved both of their lives, most likely.

"It's rude to attack someone when they're carrying out the casualties." Sasori informed him curtly.

Daisuke beamed at him, trying to yank the whip out of his grasp. No good. "It's also rude to cut in on someone's fight like that," he replied in kind, red eyes glittering like rubies. "Let go—or I'll make you."

Sasori's mouth twitched upward into a tiny smirk, and he paused a long moment before replying. "...I'd like to see you try. Brat."

Daisuke reached back around with his free hand, pulling a long sword out of the sheath on his belt. Sasori's eyes flickered down to the rain sliding down the blade, and the other used the opportunity to jab it forward, aimed at Sasori's neck. The puppeteer caught the sword with his other hand, not wincing in the least when it went clean through the limb and buried itself in his collarbone.

The faux Kiri-nin obviously thought that the battle was won from this, but Sasori surprised him by dislodging his hand from the blade—nearly cutting off a finger in the process—and left it stuck in his chest to immobilize it. Grinning with a savagery to match Daisuke's own, he reached forward with his now free hand to try to grab his neck.

But Deidara had a few things to say to that.

Or rather, a few things to do.

He had taken advantage of Hinata's position in front of him, and basically draped the unconscious Neji on her back piggy-back style. While she was trying to figure out what to do with that development, Deidara basically leapfrogged over Sasori's shoulders, both succeeding in kicking Sasori out of the way and tackling Daisuke for the second time that day.

"This is *my* fight, asshole!" he shouted over his shoulder. Sasori glowered at him and didn't respond. Deidara turned back to Daisuke, who he had pinned to the ground, his knee keeping the wrist and hand holding that whip of his stationary. The kid looked back up at him with eyes that could only be described as challenging.

"Kill me, then. If you think you're so tough." Daisuke said flatly.

Deidara wondered what the heck was *up* with this supposed spy. Did he have a death wish? Or an ulterior motive? What was his real primary motive for coming into the foreign village, anyway? And while he was trying to figure out the repercussions of taking Daisuke's advice, apparently the black-haired boy thought he was hesitating. He beamed, and while this caught the blonde off guard, he brought his knee up to jab him in the stomach.

He didn't let go, but evidently the move wasn't supposed to make him. While his eyes had shut involuntarily and he was sucking breath back into his body, Daisuke used the opportunity to twist around and yank his sword out of its sheath on his belt. Deidara rolled away from him, impulsively

scattering a handful of small bombs on the area where his opponent had likewise got away. Daisuke noticed them a little too late, and gracelessly threw himself out of the way just as a pair of them exploded.

Just as he landed, he threw a handful of shuriken at Deidara, but the Akatsuki member cut through the wires attached to them with relative ease. The blonde was watching Daisuke carefully, watching for any patterns of movement or attacking, trying to figure out what he could do to end this quickly. And without killing villagers. ...Or the village itself.

Daisuke also appeared to be contemplating his next move, scanning the ground for the remaining landmines Deidara had set. His eyes darted over to where Hinata was at one point, and Deidara unconsciously mimicked the move. Quick as lightning, Daisuke jumped off the roof and ran towards her, pulling back his arm to lash out with the whip. Deidara raced him to the Hyuuga girl, jumping in front of her and making the signs for Karura—village be damned, this kid was going down.

Unfortunately, it was a feint.

Upon making contact with his arm, the water whip splashed into obscurity, though it gave Deidara a near heart attack. Daisuke switched directions practically in mid-air, once again running into the crowd, now that Deidara was distracted with protecting Hinata. The antsy mixture of civilians and lower-ranking ninja scattered, but as they parted, Daisuke was left standing in the open. He held a kunai to a brown-haired girl's neck, and was glaring at Deidara under his bangs.

"I didn't want to have to do this, you know!" he shouted over the rain, tightening his grip on the girl. Hinata stifled a gasp behind him, and Deidara's eyes narrowed. Like he gave a crap for civilians... Daisuke seemed to sense this, and smiled smugly at him. "You can't protect everyone in this village, Deidara-senpai. I'll keep killing villagers until you tell me what I need to know, and let me go. And if I run out of villagers—let's see if we can race to Hinata-chan again, hm?"

-.-.-

Daisuke was a little disappointed that Deidara's temper forced him into this position. But he could cope. He was even more disappointed, however, when his favorite artist didn't do anything to even attempt to bargain with him for this girl's life. "...I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear. Raising his voice, he shouted once more, "Well? What'll it be? Going to reason now?"

Deidara still didn't reply. Daisuke let him think, and instead worked on trying to gauge the others' reactions. Sasori looked completely indifferent to his comrade's dilemma. He was sitting cross-legged on top of Hiruko, apparently examining the puppet's tail-like-thing. Hinata was staring at them both with nothing short of a horrified expression, and Daisuke's smile turned a little helpless. It wasn't as if *he* could control the situation any better than Deidara could.

At least Neji was out of the fight. He and Neji never particularly got along, especially since he had hung out with Lee quite a bit. Maybe he just didn't affiliate with anyone who got that close to Lee. Daisuke's arm gave a little tingle, reminding him how close he had gotten to getting his entire chakra system blocked. *Close call*, he thought idly, returning his eyes back to Deidara.

"...Oh well. Guess you really are a bad guy!" he called cheerfully. The girl in his grasp shifted slightly, peeking up at him with dark green eyes. "Pity I'll have to kill such a cute girl. I guess you

don't have any sympathy for non-shinobi, these days."

For the first time—aside from offering a slight snort when first grabbed—the girl spoke. "Or maybe Deidara-sama knows what he's doing. It's quite obvious *you* don't."

Daisuke looked down at her, biting back a chuckle. "Huh?"

That was when her eyes shifted into an ice-like color, and she delivered a punch to his stomach strong enough to break his grasp on her and send him into the ground. The girl crossed her arms, glaring down at him with icy green eyes, evaluating him silently. "You let your guard drop. Now get out of the village before this gets messier than it has to be." she commanded.

"Ohh, a *kunoichi*... guess that's what I get for just grabbing some random hostage..." Daisuke laughed at himself, standing back off and dusting off his pants. "You have very pretty eyes."

"Out. Now." she hissed venomously. Daisuke glanced over her shoulder, to try to see Deidara's reaction. He looked utterly bemused by this change of events; it was obvious he had no idea who this girl was, and with what authority she was ordering him to leave. Maybe she was just a concerned civilian.

"I'm sorry, but I have some quick business first. But I might be persuaded to hurry it up for a kiss?" he tried, raising his eyebrows with an innocent smile. She colored rapidly, uncrossing her arms and clenching her fists at her sides. Wrong move. "Okay, okay. I'll settle for your name." He held up his hands in front of him helplessly, though the sword and kunai still in his grasp sort of ruined the effect. Hastily he dropped the knife, and sheathed the blade to show that he would make good on his word.

"I should have you executed! Fighting with Deidara-sama, insubordination, coming into the village under false pretenses... I don't even know what else you've been up to. What *have* you been up to?" she demanded shrewdly.

Daisuke once again glanced over her shoulder. Deidara was whispering something to Hinata, and she was shaking her head quite enthusiastically. She gestured wildly to this mysterious, brown-haired, green-eyed girl, glancing at her with a kind of excitement. Apparently *she* recognized her, at least...

"I'm just trying to make friends. Hinata-chan was the one who attacked me, and her blonde guard dog just worsened the situation. He just jumped right in without any knowledge of what was happening. *He's* in the fault, not me. Is this how you treat all your refugees?" he asked pitifully, pouting. Maybe this girl would let him talk himself out of this situation.

"Deidara-sama is *Akatsuki*. This village is theirs. He is *not* in the wrong." She sized him up, and Daisuke decided to return the favor. She was a scrawny little thing, with an oversized shirt—it could almost count for a dress—and some much-too-baggy pants. But the way her clothes were sticking to her in the rain, he could say quite safely that she couldn't be hiding any weapons on her. He, on the other hand, had kunai, shuriken, his sword, and most of his chakra. Those eyes of hers were intriguing, though...

"Interesting logic. Now, my rebuttal: If you insist that we've been fighting, then I'll allow you that much. But then you also have to admit that I've been holding my own. Who are you to say that you're on par with that kind of strength?" He gave her his best menacing glare, but wasn't rewarded. She stood resolute, looking at him like she had just scraped him off of her sandal. Daisuke felt his expression soften into a lopsided grin; he couldn't stay mad at a girl.

"You are being arrogant and stupid. Deidara-sama *obviously* was trying to look out for the villagers, as well as Hinata-san. You'd be dead if he was fighting you with any semblance of sincerity. No one can stand up to an Akatsuki member." she told him with a prim sniff.

Daisuke groaned, putting his face in his hands. "Oh, *no*, another Akatsuki fan girl..."

He was given another dark blush for his troubles. Flustered, she shouted, "Hardly! I'm *supposed* to look up to Pein-sama and his Akatsuki! It's my *job*!"

Skeptically, he raised an eyebrow. She stuck her tongue out at him, her eyes fading back into a dark, dull green. Daisuke smiled to himself. So it was a bloodline limit. None he had ever seen, too... "Hey, whatever you say. Though while I'm making rude and potentially fatal comments, may I ask what kind of bloodline you have, Pretty Eyes-chan?"

She stiffened, eyes turning icy once more. "None of your damn business! Quit with the flippancy and start explaining." Bringing up one hand, she snapped her fingers. Shockingly, Sasori appeared beside her with a *Shunshin*, looking bored.

Oh shit, maybe she does have some kind of power. Is she in the organization? an unnerved Daisuke thought, taking half a step backward.

Sasori watched his movement, and then turned to the green-eyed kunoichi. "What do you want?" He didn't sound rude, just mildly interested. "I had figured that Deidara could take care of this quite nicely without having to bloody too many hands. Was I wrong in my assumption?"

Daisuke sneaked a peek over to where Deidara and Hinata were standing stock still, looking absolutely flabbergasted that Sasori, of all people, answered the girl's beckon. At least they didn't know what was going on, either...

"I don't know. What's going on here?"

"He said he was a Kiri-nin. He lied. He's from Konoha, and Deidara doesn't like him." The black-haired jounin realized that Sasori wasn't following any orders; he just seemed to be answering her question out of an indifferent courtesy. Maybe he was bored enough with letting his partner do all the work.

"Deidara-senpai liked me fine, before. Now is this really necessary?" Daisuke asked, putting his hands on his hips. Sasori didn't appear to miss how close that placed his hand to the hilt of his sword.

"Evidently. If Midori-sama has to come and break up this fight, it must mean that you were causing quite a scene." The girl—Midori, apparently—didn't miss the scorn he placed on the honorific. "Maybe if you had just told us what you wanted earlier, this could have been avoided."

"I was curious." Daisuke replied automatically. Maybe he could *still* talk himself out of this, miraculously. "About the Akatsuki. I took the Leaf's mission into the village as an excuse. I wanted to know what was up with this Rain god or whatever..."

"Don't talk about Pein-sama like that!" Midori snapped, reddening again. "He *is* a god, he saved this village, and he isn't some object of curiosity to outsiders!" Sasori sighed, wiping a bit of hair out of his eyes. He was used to this behavior, no doubt.

"If that even *is* true, it still remains to question what will happen to you, Ikari-san." he drawled, frowning slightly at a chip on his fingernail polish. "Curious or not, you still lied to get into this village. I say we have him executed."

"I agree!" Midori nodded vehemently, glaring daggers at Daisuke. He smiled at her, and she just turned away. By this time, Deidara appeared to have finally worked up the courage—or the interest—to come over to investigate what was holding up his fight. Hinata remained behind in their original position, looking pretty pathetic in the pouring rain clutching Neji's unconscious body. He couldn't help but feel a little bit sorry for her.

"What are you guys standing here *talking* for, yeah! Sasori-danna why didn't you just kill him?" Deidara asked suspiciously, setting a clay owl on his head to make sure it was perfectly visible to all of them.

"Shut up, brat, we're talking politics." Sasori replied without batting an eye, keeping his gaze on his nails. Deidara looked like he didn't know who he wanted to kill more—Daisuke or Sasori. "If he really is honest about coming here out of simple curiosity, and if Konoha sent him, I'm sure he'd be willing to tell us all he knows about the village. It might give us some helpful insight."

"And then what? He could be feeding us a lot of crap, and might be here to gather information on our own city." Midori said with a small shake of her head.

"It's getting to the point where it won't *matter*." Sasori murmured, looking up at her. She seemed to get some unspoken hint, and nodded with a look of awe on her face.

"So..." Daisuke said after a beat. "...Do I live?"

"I think *I'll* be the one to decide that." The voice was the first giveaway. None of them had noticed the new shinobi in the rain until he spoke, and strode over with purpose. The man had long, ginger hair, a stray lock falling off to the side over his Ame hitai-ate, the rest of it held up in a tight ponytail. He had more piercings than Daisuke cared to count and bizarre, grey eyes. And he was wearing an Akatsuki cloak.

Deidara voiced his unspoken thought. "Who the hell are *you*, yeah?"

--.-

Sasori could have killed Deidara right then and there. As it was, he took several steps back, out of the sudden danger zone, and coughed behind his fist. *This... is going to get interesting.*

The man looked at Deidara as if he might kill him, too. "... " Daisuke was staring outright at his ringed eyes, mouth agape. Midori looked as if she might faint from sheer honor at this impromptu meeting. Sasori suddenly wondered if he was the only sane one present. Finally, he spoke, smoothly ignoring Deidara's rude question. "Midori-san, this is the boy?"

"Y-Yes sir!" she squeaked, clasping her hands in front of her. "He—He infiltrated your village and says he's curious about the Akatsuki an-and I think he should be executed."

"Hm."

Deidara's visible eye had gotten impossibly wide when she said 'your village'. He looked at the orange-haired man, glancing back and forth between him and Sasori. Sasori tried hard not to laugh at the expression on his face. Obviously he just grasped how close he was to getting killed for his remark, too.

"Stand up straight." Pein ordered, gesturing up with a single finger. Daisuke reflexively straightened his back, tilting back his chin. The older man walked a quick circle around him, though it was obvious it was more for show than anything else. "...We haven't had someone stupid enough who has tried to come into the Rain, before. I'm not sure what to do with you." he said conversationally, leaning his elbow on the surprised jounin's shoulder.

Daisuke's eyes were set on Midori, silently pleading for her to intervene.

"I vote we kill him, yeah." Deidara piped up bravely. The leader gave him a withering look, and he backed down again.

"Hmm, hmm." he hummed, tilting his head to the side. The gears in Daisuke's head were almost visibly turning, and finally a look of dawning realization overtook his features. Strangely, he didn't look scared; he looked *thrilled*.

The boy must have had a death wish, because he looked up at the leader, and asked, "So that's the Rinnegan? Is it just as strong as all of the legends?" Pein looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Undeterred, Daisuke continued. Sasori didn't know if he was really interested—or how he got his information—or if he was trying to save his own skin. "Can you really use all of the elements? How many jutsus do you know? Does it help any with genjutsu? Do the piercings come with the eyes, or do you just like stabbing metal rods into your face?"

This kid was toast.

Deidara was hiding his mouth in his sleeve, shaking with the effort not to laugh. Midori looked like someone had killed her cat and dropped its corpse at her feet, and stomped on it a few times for good measure. Pein himself looked... his face was completely blank. Sasori smirked, ducking his head to hide his face behind his uniform's high collar. Daisuke had definitely *not* been trying to save his own skin.

"...You have a mouth like that but you still haven't been killed by someone?"

"No, sir." Daisuke said proudly, puffing out his chest.

Pein shook his head, his long hair, heavy from the rain, swinging like a pendulum down his back. "Alright then. You're going to be Midori's bodyguard from here on out. If you take one step out of bounds, or do anything that would harm her, or ever shirk your duty in the least, I'll kill you personally."

Three jaws hit the ground. Sasori felt like he should commit seppuku just for hearing such words. Midori looked ready to cry. Then again, so did Deidara. Daisuke looked like he had just been told that pigs fly and the sky was currently neon green.

"Midori, if he ever gets out of hand, I give you full permission to kill him, or summon one of my Akatsuki members to kill him for you. If he should kill you before, have full faith in the fact that you will be avenged in the most bloody way possible." Pein patted her on the head, almost comfortingly, and vanished from sight.

"...I *hate* you." Midori spat at Daisuke. The shock seemed to be sinking in, and she seemed close to tears. "Why Pein-sama put me with such a—a—an *idiot* is beyond me!"

"I think he was impressed that I haven't gotten killed yet. Surely that's a feat in this village." Daisuke remarked dryly, slinging an arm around her shoulders. She tried to get away, but he held her firm. "So, Midori-chan, why would a pretty girl like you need a bodyguard?"

"Call me 'pretty girl' once more and I'll have you executed for insubordination to your commanding officer." she snarled.

"Hey, just because I'm a bodyguard doesn't mean you're in charge. I'd like to think of us as more of... partners." He directed this last part at Deidara and Sasori, irritatingly enough.

"Idiot. I report directly to Konan-sama and Pein-sama. No one is *my* partner. The Rain Lord doesn't need one." With that, she turned on her heel and stalked out into the rain.

Daisuke watched her go, and then promptly realized that he would probably get killed by Deidara if he didn't follow her. "I'll get your autograph later, okay?" he chirped brightly, dodging the clay spider thrown at his head.

"Just another day in Amegakure..." Sasori sighed to himself, turning to walk back over to where Hinata was, as Deidara decided to take it upon himself to assassinate the Rain Lord's bodyguard. He was much too old for things like this. As an afterthought, he yanked on the chakra strings he had connected to Deidara's shoulders, literally dragging him back through the mud and the puddles behind him. "Just another day indeed... I hope tomorrow isn't this frustrating."

"—and I swear if I ever see you again I'll kill you on the spot, bastard! Hell yeah!"

Hinata watched them approach with a guarded expression. "Why was the Rain Lord here...?"

"Trying to break up the fight, and then Daisuke ended up being assigned as her bodyguard. She wasn't pleased, to say the least." Sasori replied flatly, dropping the strings connecting him to his partner. The Hyuuga girl nodded seriously, mulling that over.

"So that man... he was Leader-sama?"

"I wouldn't go around advertising that fact... no one outside the Akatsuki and Midori is supposed to know. Plus it... complicates things when the civilians gossip about his different... *styles*." he advised, making the seal to return Hiruko to its scroll. The puppet vanished in a puff of smoke. She nodded dumbly, her arms still wrapped around Neji's shoulders rather tightly. Sasori smiled to himself at the sight. Poor Deidara...

"...I'm hungry, can we go eat, yeah?" Deidara asked plaintively, like nothing had happened. Poor Deidara indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: That wasn't what anyone was expecting! Will Daisuke behave, or will he cause another scene? Leader-sama decides that the Akatsuki needs a day off...but of course, forcing that many homicidal maniacs to stay in close-quarters probably isn't the best idea in the world. At least there's a suitable distraction...

Disclaimer: I do not own Daisuke, any of the canon characters or settings, and own only what is original to this story. (Which right now is very few characters, thankfully.) Centurious The Azure and Masashi Kishimoto respectively own them.

Akatsuki Day Off

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata was just now getting used to Pein (almost a week later). He seemed quite happy about something—smug, almost—and it always caught her off guard to see him like that. His piercings had changed, his hair was nearly to the backs of his knees, and he was indescribably *shorter*. Just by a few inches, but it completely baffled her to see the previous height difference between him and Konan reduced. Almost eradicated, even.

Deidara seemed to take it all in stride.

Luckily or unluckily for the heiress, she had had her little 'talk' with him. He took that in stride, too, infuriatingly enough. Most of the conversation consisted of her hyperventilating and trying not to pass out, and him trying very hard not to laugh. By the time they had actually figured out what they were, he had only told her, "Someone would be *crazy* to ignore you, Bya-chan. I've already missed out on being your knight in shining armor, so let's just continue on with whatever relationship we have, yeah?"

Hinata had agreed, if a bit sullenly. Deidara seemed amused by her question, even if she had nearly died of mortification. And when Sasori had walked in on them just a few minutes later, Deidara announced to him, "I've just been dumped, yeah!"

Hinata had decided to seek decidedly female company after that. Konan was still feeling under the weather, and after stopping by her room to tell her to get well and bring her a glass of water she had requested, she had to go elsewhere for her female company. Midori—it was almost pathetic that she hadn't even learned her name earlier, but she *was* still that green-eyed girl from that horrible mission months ago—had spent the night once, to try to get rid of Daisuke. He had either developed a huge crush on her, or just enjoyed his new position in the government.

Midori was nice, if a bit fanatical about the Akatsuki—especially Pein. Hinata managed to find her in the village, giving a speech to a large crowd from a raised platform. Daisuke was standing behind her, holding a green umbrella over her head. She didn't seem to mind him terribly right then. The Hyuuga just waited for her to finish addressing the public, and then caught up with her afterward.

"We should go to the baths." the brunette said breathlessly, right after she jumped down. Hinata was a bit surprised at the suddenness of the suggestion.

"Um... why?"

"Because since it would be a bunch of naked women, certain annoying males couldn't follow." Midori chirped happily, grinning deviously at Daisuke.

"That's not fair. Why do you want to get rid of me so badly, Midori-chaaaaan?" he whined, hanging his head.

"I told you not to call me that. This is a strictly professional relationship, and I shall be addressed by my rightful title." Okay, so she was fanatical and she was letting the power go to her head. But she was still nice.

"Hinata-chan, you feel sorry for me, don't you? I mean, if it was Deidara or Neji who was spurning

you, you'd feel bad, right?" Daisuke turned to her, pouting.

She blushed, and turned to Midori. "Y-Yes. Let's go to the baths." The bodyguard looked even more put-out, but at least had the grace to put on a resigned expression. Hinata bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Oh! Could we please invite Konan-sempai? She's feeling rather ill, and I bet a nice, hot bath would help..." Plus, Hinata had a sudden craving for as much female company as she could garner. Men were such... pigs. Honestly.

"Sure!"

So the two kunoichi had their quest, and they stormed the Akatsuki tower purposefully. (Daisuke just trailed along behind them, looking incredibly nervous at entering the tower with the casualty that they managed.) Knocking on the blunette's door, it was opened by a very disheveled woman. Her hair was down, and she had obviously just gotten out of bed. She didn't have any makeup on, or even the usual stud in her bottom lip. This was the first time Hinata hadn't seen her in her uniform or a kimono; she was wearing a shapeless, white night robe that didn't make her look any prettier. She *must* be feeling bad.

"Konan-sama!" Midori gave her a small bow, beaming. "Would you like to accompany us to the baths? You look like you need some relaxing, and we can, you know, talk and stuff..."

"I don't think that's such a good idea." Konan said flatly, running one hand through her hair. She leaned against the doorframe, the other arm going around her stomach. "I still don't feel well, girls..."

"It'll make you feel better!" Hinata added hopefully. "Plus hanging out with us m-might get your mind off of this illness, and psychologically you know that does wonders for the body!" Good, play on the woman's ninja training.

"I just need rest, and plenty of it."

"You can rest in the water! It will be warm and relaxing..." Midori said quickly, still keeping a warm smile on her face.

Konan instead turned to Daisuke, asking him, "Can't you keep these two in line?"

"No ma'am. I guess not." he replied with a grin.

She sighed, shaking her head a little. "Not... today. Plus... water and paper don't mix very well."

"You can just dip your feet in or something! Or you can just sit in the steam! Oh, it'll be good for you!" Midori pleaded, practically on her knees.

Unfortunately, right when they were about to break down her defenses, Deidara's 'Daisuke-is-here-must-kill-him' senses went off. He practically came out of nowhere. He grabbed the black-haired bodyguard and was about to punch him, when he noticed the other two girls there as well. Hinata scowled at him, still not forgiving him for laughing at her. "...What, yeah?"

"We're just going to the baths. Konan-sempai is coming with us." she replied neatly.

"And you can keep him." Midori added, nodding towards Daisuke.

"Oh, cool, yeah." Apparently Deidara couldn't take a hint. He beamed at them, dropping Daisuke, and putting his hands on his hips. "Can I come? I need to get away from Sasori-danna—he's driving me crazy—and I can just use the *Oiroke* jutsu like last time, yeah."

Hinata blushed darkly at the memory. "No."

"Fine, then I'll just go on my own. I wanna drown this guy, anyway." He lost his grin, and was again sneering in Daisuke's general direction.

Unfortunately, Deidara wasn't known for his secrecy. Somehow it turned into an Akatsuki vacation.

Konan, practically *ordered* by Pein to go with the younger girls, looked ready to beat her head against a wall. She was wearing what appeared to be her partner's uniform; it was just as baggy on her, and she had to keep rolling up the sleeves. She didn't even wear makeup. "Why, *why* did I have to come...?"

"Because we were all ordered to by Leader-sama." Hinata replied wearily. A lot of the fun was sucked out of it if they *had* to. Only Midori seemed undeterred by the command. In fact, she was nothing short of giddy.

"Ooh, maybe we'll get to see some of those guys without shirts on. I'd like to see how muscular some of them are. And ohh, Pein-sama without a shirt... wow, he must be really godly. I really don't want to see Daisuke, though. He's a jerk. I don't see why Pein-sama had to assign him the task of body guarding me... I'm completely competent on my own; I'm ex-ANBU, after all." she rambled on, quite unaware of the glare Konan had sent her.

Hinata just threw her shirt at her. The cinnamon-haired girl looked only mildly concerned, and threw her pants back at her. She missed, and instead her pants landed in the water. Midori hastily finished stripping and dove into the steaming water to retrieve them, shaking them out and sighing mournfully. Konan stayed in her borrowed uniform, practically falling asleep standing up. Hinata gave her a quizzical look. "...Are you coming in? There's only us there in here, no need to be shy, r-really..." Pein had practically commandeered the place, after all. And aside from when Deidara tried sneaking in with them anyway, it wasn't like they had *that* much of a reason to be self-conscious.

Hinata glanced at Midori, and then down at herself. Midori was very skinny and flat-chested, as opposed to Hinata. Konan probably had the best figure, anyway. Why would *she* be shy about it?

"Water and paper don't mix well." she repeated, keeping the uniform on and resting her head against a nearby wall.

"Well... it can't be *that* bad, if Pein-sama ordered us to. Just sit there in the steam, okay? It won't hurt you to relax sometimes, Konan-sama... you think a lot like a shinobi all the time." Midori said casually, resting her chin on the edge of the large bath. Hinata realized that *all* of the Akatsuki members seemed to think a lot like shinobi all of the time.

There was a loud shout next door. All three women looked over at the wall separating the baths, ready to kill someone if they were being peeped on. Hinata sighed, and stuck her feet in the water. Hopefully the leader could keep his boys in line...

-.-.-

"Why was this a good idea again?" Itachi asked icily, crossing his arms over his chest. Kisame threw a towel at him.

"Relax. At least in here no one cares if you're *beautiful*. I swear that that green-eyed chick couldn't stop staring at you..." He laughed at his partner's expense. Itachi's Sharingan turned on, but the Kiri-nin just ignored the imminent threat. "You're too feminine for your own good. No one gives a shit, though, Itachi. So quit acting like a girl and get in."

"Yeah, it's not like we're fags. Oh, wait, Deidara and Kakuzu's in here, so you better—ugh!" Hidan was dunked by his partner, and his words were drowned out by a whole lot of splashing and flailing. Kakuzu thought it was highly amusing to see how long he could hold an immortal under water without him drowning—at least, in the real sense.

"...Again, *why* was this a good idea?" Itachi repeated, tapping his foot impatiently.

Deidara sighed, leaning up against the wall in the water. He was still under the sexy jutsu; he thought it was hilarious to stay looking like a woman in the men's baths. Not that he didn't look like a woman all of the time, but he still got a good laugh whenever someone accidentally glanced this way and he flashed them to see their reaction. Sasori sat on the ground behind him, still fully clothed. The puppeteer was braiding his partner's hair, though it annoyed Deidara to no end.

"Why are you still doing that, yeah?"

"Because you're obviously a *girl* and girls *like* to have their hair braided." Sasori replied coolly. "Though one day you might wake up with braided pigtails. I would like to see how you react to that."

"I'll sleep with one eye open from now on, then, yeah." He sighed, and then immediately started cracking up at how feminine it sounded. "...Tobi, why are you *still* wearing your mask?"

"Because?" After stripping, Tobi had immediately dunked himself into the water, and left nothing but his masked head above it. Pretty suspicious. "I'm self-conscious."

Pein snorted, but covered it with a cough. Itachi's eyes eventually faded back to black, but they were still just as angry as prior. He turned his glare on the leader. "Answer me. *Why* was this a *good* idea? ...And for god's sake, Kakuzu, let him up. This is supposed to be relaxing." Kakuzu kept Hidan under the water for a beat longer, and then finally let his partner resurface. He gasped for air, flailing around wildly while he tried to reorient himself.

"I thought it would be funny, to tell you the truth." Pein shrugged. His long hair had been put up in a half-bun to keep it out of the water, which Hidan also found amusing. (Once he got all of the water out of his lungs, of course.) "And Konan needed some vacation time. She wouldn't do it without dragging all of us down with her. Typical female."

Many of the members nodded in agreement with the last statement.

"Tobi wants to know when Deidara-san will quit being a girl. It's getting uncomfortable to look at." Tobi ventured, which practically put Deidara in hysterics. He nearly slid down under the water with his laughing, but Sasori hauled him back up by the hair. For good measure, he hit him on the top of the head, hard enough to dispel the jutsu.

"Hey! Why'd you do that?" he demanded, tilting his head back to glare upwards at Sasori.

"Because. You had your fun, now please return to the realm of the sane."

"That and we wanted to see if you were actually a guy. Congrats, you got a dick." Hidan said, giving him a thumbs-up. Deidara returned it with his middle finger.

"Oh, yeah, *this* is definitely relaxing." Itachi deadpanned, finally sinking down to the level where he actually got into the water. He seemed angry at being ignored, and of course it didn't help matters when Kisame splashed him and his hair fell out of its ponytail.

"Woo! We got one stoic bastard into the water, now for the other." Daisuke cheered, grinning hopefully at Sasori. (He had tagged along, mostly because he seemed to be included in the order to 'relax'. Most of the members didn't know quite what to make of him, though he and Kisame got along quite well.)

The redhead replied with a casual middle finger, copying his partner. "I think not."

-.-.-

"Hinata-san... you should use your Byakugan."

The request caught her off guard, to say the least. She rapidly reddened, and sank deeper into the water to hide it. "Wh-What?"

"There seems to be an awful lot of angry voices over there... just check on them." Midori said seriously, nodding towards the wall. "Make sure they're not killing each other. It would be horrible if an Akatsuki member died because of this..."

"I-I'm not going to *spy* on them..." Hinata said firmly, turning away. Normally, she might have—just to see if someone *was* dying, because she was fairly certain she heard a death scream—but not when they were naked. She blushed further at the thought. "No. W-We'll figure out the fatalities *after*..."

Midori sighed, blowing bubbles in the water. "Sad, really. I was hoping that that silver-haired man would kill Daisuke for me. Hidan, I think?"

"Yes, his name is Hidan. It surprises me that Hinata-san knows more members than you, Midori-san. As the Rain Lord I'd expect you to at least know the members..." Konan said lightly. She had finally consented to undressing, but took their advice. She didn't get in the water, and instead laid on a towel in the steam, her back to them. Hinata had thought she was sleeping until she said that.

Midori frowned, pinking. "Yeah... I'll do that later..."

Then they heard a thump on the wall, and someone was shouting again. When the yelling didn't stop, however, then they started to get a little alarmed. "Th-They're just... fighting. They wouldn't kill one another. Kakuzu probably th-threw Hidan or something..." Hinata said nervously.

The shouting was still continuing, and now two different voices were discernable. Definitely an argument.

"Hinata-san... I thought you could see *chakra* with those eyes? There's hardly anything perverted about looking at a man's chakra, clothed or not..." Konan had also turned to stare at the wall, furrowing her brow.

"Th-There's two, um, layers to the Byakugan... one can see someone's chakra, and the other sees things as they appear physically..."

"Then use the one to see chakra!" Midori said in a hushed tone. She gestured vaguely in the direction of the men's bath. "Just to make sure no one's dead..."

She wasn't going to win this argument. Hinata miserably raised one hand in the sign, murmuring, "Byakugan."

-.-.-

Deidara looked up suddenly. He could have *sworn* he just heard someone scream. But then again, it was hard to hear anything over the shouting match being held. At any rate, he didn't hear anything else—aside from Hidan's long and imaginative string of obscenities and Kakuzu's manic laughter.

He just hoped that Hinata and the other girls were having better luck with their supposed 'day off' than he was. Deidara closed his eyes, but not before seeing a smug smirk on the leader's face. How odd.

-.-.-

"Y-Y-You—" Hinata had reverted back to stuttering quite rapidly when surprised or flustered. This went beyond that, however. Midori's eyes instantly turned glacial, but she didn't seem to pick up on it. Of course she wouldn't, at least not that quickly. The brunette Rain Lord turned to Konan, studying her closely.

It was almost comical how the blood slowly drained from her face.

Konan had sat up and cast some sort of silencing jutsu on the room. The shouting match next door faded away to next to nothing. The blunette glowered at both of them, turning around to face them and crossing her arms. "I swear, if either of you tell, I will have you both killed."

Hinata nodded meekly. Her Byakugan was still on, and she hastened to turn it off. Everyone was fine, next door, but the problem appeared to be in *this* room...

"Does... does Pein-sama know?" Midori ventured, raising her hand. Konan sent her a glare that could peel paint, and she sunk lower into the water fearfully.

"...Yes. It's hard to keep many secrets from your own partner..." The azure-haired woman hung her head, almost shamefully. Most of her anger seemed to seep away, and she almost seemed close to tears. Almost.

Hinata didn't know what to say, really. So Midori took over the talking. "Wh-Who..." Well, at least she got one word out. Konan turned to regard them with a flat expression. Both girls reddened, but Midori smiled slightly, uncertainly. "O-Okay then..."

"This is a secret. If either of you tell, I'll kill you." she repeated in a low voice. "And I'll kill whoever finds out." Konan was terrifying when she was angry. No one had any strength to reply, and instead she got up, walked over to them, and stuck her feet in the water. Apparently water and

paper didn't have as many problems as she had hinted at. "...Now you know why I was sick."

"Ko-Konan-sempai... is-is this what you meant when you said y-you didn't want to be a *liability* to the organization...?" Hinata asked quietly. She felt sorry for the woman, truthfully. It would have been hard enough being the only kunoichi in the Akatsuki, and that alone came with its own dangers. But *this*...

"Yes. We don't need one of our members MIA during a crucial point in our plan." she told them in a tired voice. She closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "When Kakuzu gets back from his mission to capture his Bijuu... we're going to war with Konohagakure. It wouldn't look good if Pein's partner was missing for that. Plus we're going to need a lot of firepower to take down the village... no doubt Suna will get involved as well if we can't tie it up quickly."

Hinata's eyes widened. Go to war... with her home village? Some small part of her must have always known it was coming—ever since she learned that Naruto possessed the Kyuubi—but it felt like someone had just poured salt in a barely-healed wound. "Wh... When...?"

"He'll probably be leaving in about a week. The Hachibi was last sighted near Kirigakure, so it shouldn't take longer than a week or two to capture it. Then the sealing, which would take another week or so. So in about a month, we'll be heading back to your home village, Hinata-san. And once we have the Kyuubi... Pein-sama will create his jutsu and end all wars. He'll put the crude, barbaric shinobi villages out of commission with diplomacy and with a minimum of casualties. He'll truly be the god of a new, peaceful era."

Midori's eyes were shining with awe, and she looked like she was trying not to faint from the picture Konan's words painted. Hinata wasn't as impressed. *This* was what the Akatsuki was created for? Yes, she saw the world domination thing, but... *peace*? It didn't make sense. They were the *bad* guys. Why else would they be trying to capture the strongest creatures in existence? Surely their plan wasn't so glamorous... "Is... is that really the plan of the Akatsuki? You're capturing the Bijuu to create an anti-war jutsu?"

Konan looked somewhat surprised. "It's not quite as simplistic as that, yes. And when we're so close to completing that goal and entering into the next phase of our plan, it wouldn't look good if Pein's partner wasn't visible next to him. I couldn't afford to hide for the next five months, and if anyone outside the village found out about this they would have the great misfortune to try to use it against him."

Hinata nodded. Midori, on the other hand, looked like she had just witnessed a great travesty. "Oh my—Konan-sama, are you saying—"

"Yes." the blunette replied tersely, giving them both a curt nod. The navy-haired kunoichi finally caught on, and her jaw dropped. "I'm going to terminate the pregnancy. I just haven't gotten the... opportunity to yet."

--.-

Hinata had a lot to digest that night. She slept in her own room; she couldn't bare to look at Deidara, how ignorant he was, how cheerful he was despite the fact that an unborn baby's life could very well end soon. After the most un-relaxing bath she had ever taken, as a group, the Akatsuki decided to go requisition a restaurant as well, and all three women were suspiciously

quiet all throughout the meal. No one appeared to notice, though Hinata noticed several things that she was surprised she hadn't noticed before.

Like how close Konan and Pein sat. Or like how Pein had a different kind of smile when he smiled at his partner. Or the way Itachi would stare at Tobi, like he was evaluating some sort of prize, and was wondering whether or not to go after it. Like how Hidan and Kakuzu fought, but there really *was* an undertone of affection in it. Or how Deidara's grin always brightened when he was talking to Sasori.

The Akatsuki was a lot tighter knit than she would expect, even after all of this time. Or maybe it was just changing.

Predictably she couldn't sleep much that night. And for the first time in a long time, it ironically wasn't from nightmares. She almost wished that Kisho was there, just so she could snuggle with him and talk to him and pretend that he would listen. He wouldn't judge her, and surely telling a cat wouldn't be breaking her promise not to tell. Hinata made a note to see if she could sneak Kisho back to sleep with her at night.

She judged it to be about midnight when she got up to go get a drink. She was very thirsty. Plus she was restless, and might as well do something with her newfound, almost unwanted, time. But as Hinata neared the kitchen, she heard voices.

She didn't dare activate her Byakugan; the sudden spike in chakra would surely be felt by whoever it was. Instead, she pressed herself against the wall, and tried to figure out who it was. Maybe it would still be safe to get a drink.

"...and I don't care what you say."

"You're being unreasonable. Do not have enough faith in the organization that we couldn't take down a simple village with only nine members? Like I said, Konan, only the two Sannin, the Kyuubi, and a few jounin are who we have to worry about."

Hinata's heart skipped several beats when she realized that she was eavesdropping on Konan and Pein. *Oh my god... I'll get killed if I stay here!* She silently pushed off against the wall, and started tiptoeing away when another voice spoke up.

"I think she's just scared. Women are always scared of pregnancy. She's probably afraid for the baby, too. Once this gets out, assassins will come pouring in, regardless of the fact that she *is* Akatsuki."

Hinata hadn't ever heard *that* voice before. It was deeper than Pein's, and more... malevolent. Plus the tone said that he was quite comfortable with being in charge of the conversation. Frozen with both terror and curiosity, the heiress couldn't make her limbs move to take her away from her lethal position. Her heart was pounding in her ears, but she could still make out the voices. She just listened.

"The assassins won't make it far." Pein said irritably, and there was a thump. He had probably just sat down. There was a few clinks of silverware, and Hinata surmised that Konan had wanted something to eat. Pregnant women had cravings at odd times, didn't they? And it would explain why they were having this discussion in the kitchen, of all places... "I just don't think she should abort. The Akatsuki is perfectly fine taking on Konohagakure without her help. It'd be safer if she stayed behind, anyway."

"You are *not* leaving me behind!" Konan sounded just as irritable as him. "Suna will probably send

troops in once they get word of it, and Amegakure is practically between the two countries. I wouldn't be any safer here than with the rest of the organization."

"I agree with that fact, at least." the third voice said idly. "Several villages will probably come out into the open on how they stand with Konoha. I'm pretty sure that Kirigakure is in an alliance with them, but Iwa might come to support us, intentionally or not. They hate Leaf ninja." A pause, and a small chuckle. "Kumogakure won't be a problem, at any rate."

"Exactly." Konan said exasperatedly. The next time she spoke, she sounded like she was talking around something. Probably eating something. "*You're* not the one who has to deal with this. As far as I'm concerned, this is between Pein and I."

There was a long pause. Then, finally, that unknown voice spoke. "You've never been that rude to me before, Konan. I'm surprised. The pregnancy must be unbalancing your hormones already."

Pein snorted loudly. "Already? You obviously weren't in the vicinity when she first found out..."

Hinata imagined the blue-haired woman giving him a scathing look. "It doesn't matter. I'm going to end this pregnancy."

All was quiet for a long time. No one spoke, and Hinata decided to leave before she got caught. It was nothing short of a miracle that she hadn't been already. Finally her legs were following her mental orders, too, and she tiptoed quietly away from the kitchen. She glanced back over her shoulder as she turned the corner, just in case.

When she turned back around, however, her eyes were suddenly cut off by someone's chest. Hinata opened her mouth to scream, but a gloved hand came down and clamped itself over her mouth, muffling the surprised shriek. "Shh! Hinata-chan, what are you doing up...?" Tobi whispered, leaning down so he was eye-level with her.

The scream died away in her throat. "Mmph—" he removed his hand, instead placing it on her shoulder, "—T-Tobi-chan, you scared me..." Her heart was fluttering in her chest like a scared hummingbird, and she felt several years drop off of her lifespan. She couldn't see in the dark, or with his mask on, but she felt his eyes on her. Or eye. Whichever. Guiltily, she mumbled, "I-I was thirsty, and... I heard Leader-sama and Konan-sempai talking in the kitchen..."

"Oh? What were they talking about?" he asked quietly, steering her back down the hallway towards her room. She didn't necessarily mind; she had almost screamed and alerted them to her presence, so she wanted to put some distance between her and the kitchen.

"Ko—umm... I don't know... I just heard voices." She couldn't tell Tobi that Konan was pregnant. It would get her killed. Tobi's grip tightened slightly on her shoulder, and he spun her around to face him. She looked at him quizzically.

"I guess that's okay." he said seriously. When he wasn't gibbering away happily, his voice was actually sort of deep... The masked ninja leaned down to stare into her eyes again, murmuring, "You have pretty eyes..."

Hinata was about to open her mouth to reply, when she suddenly felt very, *very* sleepy. Her head drooped down, and slowly, she felt her body fall forward into his arms and into the embrace of dreamless sleep.

Deidara felt a little put-off when Hinata hadn't wanted to sleep with him, but he supposed he deserved it. It *was* funny how embarrassing she thought it was, talking about their non-existent relationship. But the next morning, he decided to make amends.

Bright and early, he was knocking on her door, bent on having breakfast with her and apologizing. She opened the door, and with a little guilty smile, he realized that he must have woken her up. "Morning, yeah!" he said cheerfully, giving her a grin.

"M-Morning..." she yawned back at him.

Sleepily, almost like she was sleepwalking, she turned and went back into her room. Deidara followed her, shutting the door behind him. She pulled on a pair of pants, and he modestly turned away while she changed out of her nightshirt. He was even kind enough to brush her hair for her. (It was starting to grow out again. He had to admit he liked her hair when it was longer.)

"Sleep well?" he asked, brushing out a particularly nasty knot.

Hinata nodded, a little more awake now. "I guess... I'm still pretty tired, and I had this really weird dream..."

"Hmm, cool, yeah. Want to get breakfast with me, Bya-chan? I'm sorry I laughed at you yesterday." Might as well get the apologizing over with. She didn't reply for a few moments, and then nodded again.

"Sure."

Deidara finished brushing her hair, and took her hand and led her back out into the hallway. Not only was he forgiven, but she hadn't flinched when he touched her for several months. To think, less than a year ago she would shudder when she just *looked* at the mouths on his hands... They had come a long way since that fateful day in the Konoha forest.

"*WHAT?!*" Someone suddenly shouted down the hall, and there was a scuffling sound, like someone was knocking over a chair or something. Deidara raised an eyebrow, wondering whether or not to investigate. The dilemma was solved for him quite simply. Hidan kicked down the door to his room—even though it was half open—and burst out. His grin was frightening; he looked like he had just been told he got to sacrifice half a village or something. Tobi followed him out, nodding frenetically.

"Yeah! I told you, Konan-san is *pregnant!*" the masked ninja squealed, still nodding.

"I *can't* fucking believe that fucking Pein was fucking her behind our fucking backs! HE KNOCKED HER UP!" Hidan shouted. Now it was hard to tell if he was overjoyed or angry at this.

Deidara's jaw dropped, and he felt Hinata's hand go tense in his. The leader... and Konan... they were together?! And she was *pregnant with his kid*?! "Hey! Wh-When did this happen, yeah?!"

Hidan and Tobi appeared to notice them for the first time. "Konan-san is about four months pregnant, according to Kabuto. So I assume that this happened four months ago, Deidara-san." Tobi informed him cheerfully.

Kabuto?! Deidara would *kill* that kid for not telling him these kinds of things before. Glancing down at the girl beside him, she had much of the same expression on her face. "Wait... four months..." he counted on his fingers, something about that timeframe sounded familiar, "...that

would have put it... *oh my god*. That would have been right after my Bijuu mission, yeah, so they got drunk and screwed and now there's a kid on the way. Sweet holy hell, yeah." Boy, he hoped Konan didn't bear a grudge.

"I'm going to go tell the other members. See you guys!"

"Yeah, likewise. So they were fucking *drunk* when they were fucking behind our backs..." Hidan growled, looking like he might snap at them for merely being in the same vicinity. The Jashinist stomped off in the opposite direction, much to their relief.

Deidara looked down at his sandals, then up at the ceiling. This made things awkward. "So... yeah. An Akatsuki kid, huh?" he tried, but Hinata just blushed and nodded mutely. "Ah... right then. Breakfast time!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh my good golly gosh! Konan is pregnant, and just in time for a war! Of course, that doesn't matter much, since she says she's going to abort. Pein sounds like he wants her to keep it, so I wonder how that will turn out...(Leader of the Akatsuki versus a pregnant woman. Battle of their lives.) The members are absolutely thrilled with the idea, now that Tobi has managed to leak the information out. Deidara's excited, but why is Sasori looking so glum? Worse-what's up with Kabuto?

Falling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kakuzu and Hidan left to get the last tailed demon (before the Kyuubi) the next morning. Hinata didn't know whether or not to be more worried about that—and its eventual repercussions—or Pein's latest plan. If it could be called that.

Evidently it was *he* who had told Tobi that Konan was pregnant. And while it was the black-haired mask-wearer who spread it around to anyone who would listen, Konan still obviously blamed her partner. He had gotten it in his head that by letting the rest of the organization know, it would increase pressure on her to keep the baby. And indeed it did, though she wasn't happy about it. Several members casually asked her if she had any names picked out, and Deidara bluntly inquired as to whether she wanted it to have blue hair or orange hair. The common consensus was that she ought to go through with it.

Unfortunately, by the week's end, it had slowly leaked out into the general public. Daisuke had been the next to know, and then Midori insisted on letting some of the stronger jounin know, just so they could be on the lookout for any suspicious looking shinobi. That slowly transformed into *all* of the jounin, who had somehow mentioned it to their genin students (there weren't many of those kinds of cells in the village, but there was enough for it to be a somewhat common sight), and it went like wildfire from there. Every morning, the front door of the tower would be littered with all sorts of offerings and gifts—both for the Akatsuki themselves, or Konan specifically, but mostly for the baby-to-be.

Hinata was pretty sure that that was what finally wore the woman down.

Seeing her idly pick up a child's kimono from the pile of gifts and just sort of sigh, she was sure that Konan was picturing trying to have a *normal* family. Pein and her and a little baby—girl or boy, she didn't know what Konan wanted—with an extended family of mass murderers and rogue ninja. How cute.

Hinata was really surprised that Deidara seemed excited about the prospect of the baby. More than excited; he was completely and utterly infatuated with the idea. She hadn't ever pegged him as the type of guy to like children, especially infants, but it warmed her heart to see him try to sculpt some sort of cute, baby animal out of clay for the infant to play with. (Nevermind the fact that she was still about five months from being due.)

Konan's pregnancy had the whole village abuzz, quite simply.

-.-.-

"Danna, what are you going to get the baby, yeah?" Deidara asked, cocking his head to the side. He couldn't quite get the right angle for the wing on this chicken... It was still cute, though. Even Hinata had said so. (Even if it was round and fat and anatomically incorrect. It was adorable.)

"How does this look?" The blonde Iwa-nin held it up for inspection.

"It's adorable!" Hinata squealed. She was enamored with all of this baby animal attempts, though

under normal circumstances he wouldn't be caught dead creating something so useless.

Sasori looked up from where he was working with a part of Hiruko's tail. "...Its left wing is crooked. Why do you want to make a chicken, of all animals, anyway?"

"Chickens are cute, yeah?" Deidara didn't quite know, either. Actually it had started out as a kitten... "So what are *you* going to get the kid, yeah? I bet you couldn't think of anything that's not poisonous or sharp and pointy."

"And because giving an infant a clay doll that could explode at any moment is *completely* safe, Deidara." Sasori returned to his work, turning his back on the other two.

"Not-uh! I'd use a *different* jutsu to animate it. Duh, danna, yeah!" he retorted, returning to his own work as well, fixing the wing.

"...Whatever. I thought I'd just use one of the models I have." Sasori tapped said model, and it sprang to life with a flick of his fingers. "Always amused me as a child, at least." It gave a little bow to them, waving.

"And look how *you* turned out to be..." Deidara mumbled, offering the corrected chicken to Hinata. She took it, setting it atop her head, grinning sheepishly.

"You really like children, don't you, Deidara-kun?" she asked, poking the inanimate bird's head. He made a sign, and it sprang to life with a ruffle of clay feathers, nestling down in her hair.

"Yeah, I guess I do, huh?" He laughed. In all honesty, he hadn't ever thought about being in any sort of close proximity to anyone younger than himself before, and he never thought about getting married or settling down. Maybe he just liked kids. They were just so innocent and they weren't biased by any sort of outside influence. "I bet you do, too, Bya-chan."

"Y-Yes! I've always wanted a fairly large family, but I'd be alright with any number of children. I really want a little girl, though..."

"That's good. You'd make a good mom, yeah."

"So would you." Sasori interjected slyly, sticking a screwdriver in his mouth to hold while he inspected the tip of Hiruko's tail. "Do you plan on settling down and starting a family after all these wars are over, Deidara?"

Deidara gave a mock gasp of surprise. "Oh! Sasori-danna cares about little old me, yeah! That's so cute." After ducking the screwdriver thrown at him, he laughed and continued seriously. "Why, yeah? Don't you like children?"

"No, not particularly. Kabuto was the only child I could ever stand, and that was because I only dealt with him sparsely and he was *quiet*. Now I have you, though." Deidara threw the screwdriver back, though he missed horribly. "But I was just wondering if I should start having nightmares about miniature Deidas now, or if it could wait."

"Oh, speaking of Kabuto-kun," Hinata stepped in quickly, before the argument could escalate further. "Do you know where he's been lately? I've wanted to ask him how long he's known about Konan-sempai's pregnancy."

"He's known for two months. And no, I haven't seen him lately. He's kept to himself for the past few months." Sasori replied shortly, looking slightly relieved that a fight didn't break out. Deidara, however, still wanted to hit him for that remark.

"I think Sasori-danna is just jealous of Kabuto and I because we both have Bya-chan looking out for us, yeah." Deidara said airily, stretching nonchalantly. "And we'll both settle down and have lives and families."

"If you're so enthusiastic about kids, go screw someone and get one. I'd love to see you trying to take care of a crying baby." the redhead replied, narrowing his eyes slightly. "Or, why not propose to Hinata-hime? If you think you're such a ladies man."

"Bya-chan and I aren't like that, yeah." Deidara pouted, but Sasori just smirked. So instead he turned to her and asked, "Hey, Bya-chan, wanna have a kid with me, yeah?"

"D-Deidara-kun!" She blushed up to the roots of her hair, though a small giggle escaped her lips. "Th-That's highly inappropriate! Neji-niisan would kill you if he heard you say such things to me...!"

"Oh, that's right. Hinata-hime already *has* her knight, doesn't she? How silly of me to have forgotten." Sasori said casually, just to rub salt in the wound. Deidara made a sound that could have passed for a growl. Hinata glared at him as well, still red-faced.

"That was highly inappropriate as w-well, Sasori-san!" She stood up, the chicken falling off her head and fluttering awkwardly to the floor. "You're just jealous because you don't have *anyone*."

"Ooh, burn. Yeah."

"You should leave now, Hinata-hime." Sasori said coolly, gesturing to the door. "Please, if you find Kabuto, tell him that I need to speak with him about his... life."

"I will." she snorted, and stooped to pick up the chicken. She looked at Deidara, then said, "I'm sorry, but Sasori-san is still an infuriating prick. I-I'll see you later..." Taking the clay chicken with her, she departed, slamming the door behind her.

Deidara laid back on Sasori's bed, folding his hands behind his head. "...Why are you so mean to her, yeah?"

Sasori took a long moment to think up a suitable answer. In the end, he finally settled on, "Hmm, I wonder."

The blonde rolled over onto his stomach, so he could see his partner's expression. "What is *that* supposed to mean, yeah?"

"One, I do not like Konoha-nin. I have never pretended it was a secret. Two, I do not particularly like most kunoichi. That I've never kept secret, either." He kept his back to him, still tinkering with the metal links.

"...Only two reasons?" Deidara prompted, narrowing his eyes a little. He didn't even know why he bothered wearing his scope today, but it didn't hurt to be prepared. Plus Konan's public announcement to the village at large had a lot of the members worrying for her safety, and several of them had taken extra precautions to ensure they kept their guard up.

"Oh, there's plenty more. I just don't see how you deserve to know." Sasori replied arrogantly, swiveling around in his chair with his arms crossed. He kept his lidded gaze locked onto Deidara's own, raising one eyebrow. "Why would we start pretending that we like each other now and trust each other, hmm, Deidara?"

"Hey, that hurts, yeah." He pushed himself up into a sitting position, frowning. Where had this

sudden hostility come from? "Just asking a question... it really annoys me how you're so mean to everyone all the time, Sasori-danna. And didn't we already have this discussion? Partnerships are built on trust, yeah."

"And you obviously trusted me enough to try to blow you up with your Karura." Sasori replied smoothly. "We obviously don't mesh well."

"I think we work plenty well together, yeah. When we're not trying to kill each other—or drive each other away, yeah." If he wanted to play the guilt card, then so be it. Deidara could pull out the big guns, too.

"Exactly. This is why I wanted to switch partners. Kakuzu and I understand each other, and we've worked together before."

"Yeah, but I hate Hidan. He swears too much and he thinks Bya-chan is a Jashinist like him, yeah." Deidara replied sullenly, scowling. "... You're at least an artist." He waved his hand at the summoning scrolls and half-finished puppets decorating the room.

"Half of ninja today are artists in one way or another. Most of them just don't have the courage to call themselves that." he stated indifferently, tilting his head to the side.

"Then at least you're brave enough to, Sasori-danna. Why don't you like me?"

"How many times have you asked me this question?"

"And how many things have you told me the truth, yeah?"

"...None. I don't see how it particularly concerns you, however."

Deidara got up to his feet, frowning darkly. "Doesn't *concern* me? You hate me and you say it doesn't concern me? You're an idiot, yeah."

"A brat like you couldn't understand the rationale behind my actions. Believe it or not, I actually possess a decent intellect and I have reasons for how I act!"

Deidara grabbed the front of his uniform, lifting him off of his feet. Grinning evilly, he hissed, "Try me. I'm tired of your shit acting all high and mighty and mysterious and treating me like a kid. I'm no kid, danna, and I'm not an idiot. Maybe if you'd open up a little once in awhile people would actually *like* you, yeah."

Sasori glared up at him, looking very much like a scorpion about to sting who had pissed it off. "You want me to open up? About what, Deidara? Why I hate Hinata or why I hate *you*? I don't really hate either of you. Hinata's a fine kunoichi, if a little shy. I only dislike her because I had thought she was competition. And I don't hate you, either. I'm only pushing you away because you are the brattiest, most spoiled, infuriating Iwa-nin artist that I have ever had the displeasure to meet. And I think I've grown too attached to you for my own good."

And then Sasori leaned up and kissed him.

It wasn't anything drastic, but the simple peck was enough to completely halt Deidara's thought process. He dropped the shorter shinobi with a thud, and slowly leaned back, blinking. He felt a little dizzy. "I..." He couldn't think of anything to say. What *could* he say? "...Bye."

He practically ran out of the room.

Sasori sighed, running a hand through his hair with a self-depreciative smile. Sitting back down at this work desk, he muttered, "That ought to get that brat off my back for awhile..."

-.-.-

Kabuto looked down at his shaking hands. After concentrating a bit, he held them still, and pulled his gloves back on. Even things such as giving himself a checkup had taken a strain on his chakra these days... It wouldn't be too long now. Six months. Half that—no, a third—if they were really going to attack Konohagakure. But it wouldn't be a waste, if he could go back to the Leaf one last time...

There were some loose ends he had to tie up.

Sasori had been unusually accommodating recently, and Kabuto couldn't help but think that he *knew*. It was probably true. He was Orochimaru's ex-partner, and had known the snake long before Kabuto had. He probably knew things about him that the medic couldn't even begin to imagine. But it didn't matter anymore, not really. After all, Orochimaru was dead. Sasori was the only one he had to watch out for now.

Even so... two months with a war, six months without one. He wouldn't have to toe the line much longer.

"Just stay on that tightrope for a few more months," he told himself, clenching his fists. His hands still weren't shaking, as long as he told himself not to. If there was one thing beside his spying and medical skills that Kabuto prided himself on, it was his control over his body.

Kabuto always saw life a certain way. Civilians lived in a city. They could go wherever, walk wherever. They were free.

Ninja were more confined to a... street. Yes, a street. There was still plenty of room, but sometimes if it got too crowded you got pushed into the ditch.

Kabuto, as a child, had been confined to a sidewalk when he began his life as a spy. Still plenty of room to walk, but he had to be careful when one or more people got on the same path as he. There wasn't *that* much room; just room for him alone.

When he was told by Sasori to spy on Orochimaru, he was confined to the curb. As long as he kept his balance, he was fine. Not a whole lot of room for slip-ups anymore. Just keep your arms out to keep steady, keep your head held high, and keep your eyes forward. Life was just a balancing act, and luckily Kabuto was always good at such things. He was actually good at quite a lot of things, he found out in his lifetime.

Then the snake Sannin broke the controlling jutsu Sasori had used on him. And he was assigned to spy on *Sasori*. Life was now a tightrope act. He didn't have a pole to keep his center; Kabuto could only rely on himself. It was tricky, sometimes, but it was made easier by the fact that he still had the whole of Konohagakure to be his tightrope.

Then Kakashi came along. That lazy, perverted man walked right up to him, stared at him for a long time, and then pushed him off of the tightrope.

It was Orochimaru who grabbed his hand before he fell completely, and put him safely back on

that rope. It had shrunk, though. It was a wire. A small, sharp, cutting wire that he had to walk, the wire that was keeping him tethered to this life. On one side, Sasori was waiting for him. Orochimaru was on the other. Kakashi was behind him, and he had no idea what was to come. Kabuto just kept trying not to think about how he might fall down the next time. Wires weren't made for supporting human weight for very long.

It was Deidara who indirectly caused him to fall the second time. He took out Orochimaru, and upset Kabuto's balance. He only had to worry about Sasori's half, and Kakashi was long gone. He fell a second time, and this time he caught himself by the fingertips. The wire was too thin and too sharp to pull himself back onto, and it cut his fingers.

Kabuto had been hanging like that ever since. No one was here to help him back up, and as the weeks passed, his grasp was slipping. Soon he would fall. For the last time. He didn't even *want* to get back up. Sometimes he just wanted to go back to the tightrope, where Kakashi had pushed him off the first time. Maybe he should have stayed down, taken the offer that Kakashi had unconsciously given him.

"Why are you sitting out here in the rain?" A soft voice jarred him out of his daydreaming. Kabuto looked dully up into white eyes, clouded with concern.

"Why are *you*?" he countered. He put his glasses, which had been resting on top of his head, back onto his nose. Hinata came fully into focus, and so did the dull grey sky and dull blue buildings and rain and puddles and mud. He had never liked Amegakure.

"I came out to see you, of course. We haven't talked in awhile." She sat down beside him, leaning against the wall of the Akatsuki tower. Kabuto didn't reply, and instead looked up at the uniform sky above. The rain made him feel like he was alone in the world. Even if he had a girl sitting an arm's length from him. "Sasori-san says that he... umm... needs to speak with you about your *life* or something like that. I think he just wants to speak to you." Hinata told him, brushing a wet lock of hair behind her ear.

Ah. So Sasori *did* know. Not like he could do anything—not like he would care. "...I'll make a note to visit with him. Thank you, Hinata-chan."

She smiled at him, and he returned it, if he didn't mean it. "So... what have you been up to these past few months? I understand that you've known that Konan-sempai has been pregnant for some time."

"Two months. I made the mistake of making an offhand comment about it and nearly got killed for my effort. She seemed to think that a medic wouldn't recognize a pregnant woman." he replied wryly, drawing his knees up to his chest. Hinata laughed a little, pulling up her hand to cover her mouth politely. Such a contrast from the rest of the world; she actually seemed like a human most of the time.

"It's only just now been made public, thanks to Tobi-chan. She wasn't happy about that..."

"Yes, I've heard. She seems to think that I'm going to be the medic to check up on her throughout the pregnancy. I don't know where she got such a silly notion." Kabuto rolled his eyes, pursing his lips. "A lot of you Akatsuki ninja seem to think that I don't have better things to do than worry for some woman's baby."

"W-Well, it would be nice if you helped her through this. I think she's just scared—and you're an excellent medic, Kabuto-kun."

"It's not that I wouldn't do it, I just do not like presumptuous people."

They lapsed back into silence. The cold raindrops were starting to sting a little on his bare arms, and he could feel his hands starting to shake again. He crossed his arms, holding them still before Hinata could notice. He almost told her once, and he wouldn't make the same mistake again. It was none of her concern. Curse the human nature to share problems that didn't concern others.

"Are you cold?" she asked, looking at him sideways. The Hyuuga kunoichi tilted her head a little, and that simple move made her look a lot younger. Not that she wasn't young, anyway. But Kabuto sighed quietly, thinking back years and years ago, when he had healed that meek little girl at her first chuunin exam... He felt so old now. The resurrection jutsu probably sped up the aging process, but most of it was mental.

"No, I'm fine." the silver-haired medic lied smoothly. Lying was second nature to shinobi, after all.

"You're shivering." Shit, so she had noticed. Luckily she'd taken it for shivering from the pelting rain...

"I'm fine, really. Sometimes I just like the feel of cold rain on my skin." That wasn't even a lie to boot! "But you'll probably be getting chilly soon, so shouldn't you be heading inside? Deidara wouldn't like it if you caught a cold on my account."

"Deidara-kun... will be fine." she said slowly, looking down at the hands folded in her lap. "...I think I'm going to move out of the tower soon. Deidara-kun and I are fighting more—and over *such* petty things—and I think it's Sasori's influence. I'm just going to let him be for a little bit and see if it does him any good. Plus I-I like the village life of Ame much better." Hinata smiled shyly at him, adding, "A lot less drama."

"I'm sure Deidara wouldn't be pleased to hear that. Or Konan. She will probably be looking to you for support these coming months, just as another female companion. Kunoichi tend to flock together in situations like these."

"Like... these...?" she repeated in confusion.

"When they're reminded of their sexuality, and more importantly, their humanity. Ninja are like that."

Yes, indeed they were.

-.-.-

Kabuto had kept to himself over the next few days, but somehow Hinata kept popping up during his inner monologues. She would bring him a cup of tea, or even a bowl of soup, and then she would sit there and make casual conversation with him. She never broached any serious subject, but she made sure that she was available if he ever even *thought* about talking to someone. It was uncanny.

It finally hit him when he was in his lab one night.

One of his experiments had just been completed successfully—an old one Orochimaru had jokingly suggested to him—and it got him into a foul mood. "What's the *point* of all of this...?" he asked the

empty room, throwing his arms wide. None of the specimens in beakers or jars answered him. "This has no goddamn point..."

He kicked over a table, and the resounding clatter of books and papers as they hit the floor drained him of most of his anger. The glass jar holding his experiment shattered upon the stone floor, and the creature inside promptly died when impaled upon a shard of glass. This almost reignited his rage, but Kabuto instead took a deep breath, and put his head in his hands.

There *was* no point. At this point he couldn't hope to start anything new, and finishing up old projects just made him feel a little nostalgic. And cranky.

A knock on the door, however, successfully kept his anger at bay. Straightening his shirt and pushing his glasses back up onto his nose, Kabuto could only wonder what Sasori would want with him at this time of night.

It wasn't Sasori. Kabuto looked down at Hinata, and she looked back up at him, an uncertain, but warm smile on her face. "S-Sorry to interrupt, but Sasori sent me again. He says that you shouldn't be cooped up alone all the time..." she said as an excuse. She closed her eyes, the uncertainty leaving her small smile. She looked angelic.

But Kabuto's own eyes widened in what he felt could only be described as *horror*. Her white eyes... *the* white eyes... *the Byakugan*. How could he have *forgotten* something like that?! The famous white eyes of the Hyuuga clan that could *see chakra systems*. No *wonder* she had been so kind to him lately. She must know—she must have known the entire time. (And no wonder she could find him so easily.)

Shit... he ducked his head, hiding his eyes from her view to try to compose himself. "How... how long have you known, Hinata?" he asked quietly, still not looking at her.

"Huh? Kn-Known what...?" she asked. He peeked through his fingers at her. She looked curious, and a little confused. Her body's posture was screaming ignorance at him. There was no way she was *that* good of a ninja.

"Nothing. Sorry, my mind spaced a little there." He offered her a warm smile, stepping aside so she could see inside his lab. "I'm sorry I haven't been too sociable lately. I've been finishing up a few experiments of mine. Pet projects, if you will."

"Understandable, I guess."

They both stood there, smiling politely at each other, ignoring the awkward silence that fell over them. Kabuto was inner turmoil, but he kept outwardly calm. That was something he was good at. He had slipped up, overestimated her... and what if it piqued her curiosity enough that she decided to investigate with her Byakugan?

But no. He was still larger than her, and stronger. He could overpower her, make her promise not to tell anyone if need be. This wasn't the end of the world.

And so *what* if she found out, anyway? Kabuto's eyes closed, just so he wouldn't narrow them. No one could do much of anything at this point. He would only get useless pity or sympathy. Sasori might even laugh at him. Deidara sure would. Kabuto himself didn't give a shit. After you die once, not a lot can scare you afterwards. ...Not really.

Kabuto kept telling himself that he *wouldn't* think about that time. Because psychologically, being resurrected from the dead just to die again was more than enough to drive someone off the edge.

Especially someone who had been tiptoeing his way along that edge even before it happened. He wouldn't think about it... he wouldn't think about it... he wouldn't think about it...

He wouldn't think about how it felt to have Kakashi's *Chidori* rip through his chest.

He wouldn't think about that blackness, that suffocating darkness that overwhelmed his sight and his hearing and his mind.

He wouldn't think about how he woke up again, back in Otogakure thanks to Orochimaru's jutsu.

He wouldn't think about how it *hurt* to be brought back to life.

He wouldn't think about how he had wanted to cry.

He wouldn't think about how he had gone through it once, and now would have to *die* again.

He wouldn't think about the cruelty of the situation.

He wouldn't think about Orochimaru dying because of one freak and having to return to Sasori, tail between his legs.

He wouldn't think about Sasori's simplistically understanding smirk.

He wouldn't think about what was going on inside of his own body... even now...

The heart that was beating under purple fabric. Did it know that it would be ending soon? It would have to. All of his internal organs had been failing. His medical jutsu kept them going, but that was about it. He was surviving completely on his chakra.

Because Orochimaru's resurrection jutsu had been created as a *temporary* thing. Neither of them had addressed that issue verbally. It made Kabuto want to curl up and sob himself asleep, or cry until he died again. It was almost like a summon, a perverse, demented summon from beyond the grave. One big hit, and it goes down. But that was true of humanity. Unlike the kunoichi beside him, Kabuto was more like a summoned beast than anyone else in the entire world.

He was running on chakra. His chakra system *was* his heart. Once he ran out of chakra, he would die. In essence, that wasn't that frightening, nor that hard to imagine. To some degree, that was true for any ninja. But where they could rely on taijutsu or recuperate... he was gone. Once his chakra ran out, Kabuto would die. Again.

The scariest thing was that his entire body was shutting down. Now he was having to expend precious chakra every day, every hour, every *minute* to just keep his body functioning properly. He was living on soldier pills. But the chakra system itself was failing, and he couldn't do a thing to stop it. Every day, it was dying. *He* was dying.

It wasn't quick or even painful like the first time. It was slow, looming, and something he couldn't ever forget. It was terrifying. *Knowing*, with unnerving certainty, that he was going to *die*... to return to that abyss... he was absolutely terrified of it, if he had been being honest with himself. It was as if the blackness was creeping in on the edges of his vision. It was hard to track its progress as it happened, but every week or so he would suddenly noticed how much he had fallen. How much he was slipping off that wire.

Kabuto had tried, once, to kill himself. The shinobi way. When he and Kakashi saw each other for the first time since that day in the hospital, he had baited the man. He had tried to push himself onto him, onto death. *It would be quick*, he told himself. *Kakashi wouldn't let me suffer*. But

Kakashi, damn that man, had figured out that something was unusual. And he hadn't done a damned thing.

Now he could only wait, and watch the darkness close in on him. One. Minute. At. A. Time.

Kabuto's hands were shaking again. Chakra exhaustion. His whole body was shaking; he needed a soldier pill. They were an addiction. He ate them more than Deidara did, really. It was all he could do to cling to life, because death terrified him. He didn't want to return to it.

Maybe one day he could work up the cowardice to piss Sasori off enough to have him kill him. But Sasori probably wouldn't do that. He must know something was up, and he wouldn't do a damned thing about it, either. He was too busy playing with Deidara.

Sasori. He had tried to kill himself, too. More than anyone else knew, really. His whole puppet operation had been a twisted way of committing suicide. If Sasori could do it, why couldn't Kabuto? He didn't have a stupid blonde to keep him afloat, to haul him back up onto that wire. Kakashi was still a good little Leaf ninja, safely tucked away in Konohagakure. Orochimaru was dead. Sasori was as good as dead. No one cared if one scared little medic died again.

Without remembering where he was, Kabuto felt the tears sting at his eyes. He pushed his glasses up onto the top of his head, rubbing his palms up against his eyes. He wouldn't cry. He couldn't. He hadn't cried since that first night when he was 'alive' again.

Clearing his throat and blinking back the slight sting of tears, he turned back to Hinata with a cheery smile. He pulled his glasses back down onto the bridge of his nose, pleased to see that clearing his throat had covered his odd behavior. "Right..." What had they been talking about again? Better to just cut this off painlessly... "I'll go see Sasori-sama as soon as I can, and I'll try to be more sociable, okay? And I'll see you later, Hinata-chan."

"O-Oh, okay..." He practically pushed her out the door and quickly shut it behind her. His heart was beating abnormally fast in his chest, and Kabuto pushed his glasses up over his eyes again, rubbing at them with his wrist.

The medic slid down onto the floor, biting back a sob. How shameful, breaking down like a genin with their first kill. But this was different. This wasn't some nameless, faceless shinobi that got in the way of the mission. This was *himself*.

He didn't *want* to die again.

It wasn't fair. It was cruel. It was twisted and perverse and traumatic.

He fell back, letting himself lean against the wall. Still the tears leaked out of his closed eyes, and he could only just shake and cry and try not to sob.

Kabuto pulled his knees up to his chest. And he finally gave in. The door opened behind him with a click, but he didn't hear it.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and jumped. *Shit*. He couldn't even bear to look at her, that stupid girl who thought she had a right to be so carefree in a place like this. She didn't have months to live. With a bodyguard as psychotic as Deidara or Neji, she would probably outlive them all. Kabuto would be the first to die. He wouldn't even make it to the end of Konan's pregnancy... "I-I'm sorry..." he choked out, pulling on his bangs. "I'm s-so sorry that you h-have to see me like th-this..."

"What's wrong?" was all she asked. She had a kindness and sympathy in her voice that not many

kunoichi possessed anymore. It reminded him of the mother he never had.

Kabuto couldn't reply. He just shamefully kept crying and sobbing and wanting another soldier pill, to cling to this fake life he so hated. Life was cruel. It was cruel to put a twenty-four year old in a situation like this. It was cruel to let great men like Orochimaru work against death. And then be killed themselves. It was cruel... all of it. Orochimaru, and Sasori, and the Akatsuki, and the ninja villages, and the world.

It was cruel how a sixteen-year-old girl could just hug him and keep that innocence and warmth that the world didn't possess anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The village prepares for war as the Akatsuki finish sealing the eighth Bijuu. Life goes on, regardless, and Hinata figures out just what she's going to do for this whole 'war' deal. She and Neji work out a few of their 'problems', whereas Deidara is just plain ignoring his own...and Kabuto watches Sasori's drama unfold with amusement.

The Eighth Sealing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata stuck to Kabuto like glue. Both Neji and Deidara noticed this immediately, but didn't dare make any comments. Every chance she got, she gave Kabuto a hug, too. And it had only been two days since she found out that he was dying. Everyone had noticed her sudden affection for the medic, and he had noticed that they had noticed as well.

He kept saying that she didn't need to do this. She didn't need to care, or even pretend to. But Hinata did. He had saved her life on more than one occasion, and she felt bad that she couldn't do anything other than comfort him. But comfort him she would, even if he acted like he didn't want her to. Because he really did, deep down. She could tell.

In addition to this, everyone had noticed that Deidara and Sasori were avoiding each other. Yet again. Kakuzu had said something along the lines of Amegakure turning into a soap opera. He had gotten back with his demon after only about two weeks to see Konan screaming at Pein, Hinata clinging to Kabuto, and Sasori and Deidara blushing (at least on the Iwa-nin's behalf) madly whenever they saw each other. He wasn't amused.

But then they had disappeared. All ten members, off to seal the last demon before Naruto. Deidara had told her that it could take over a week to completely seal it; that much chakra took awhile to suck out of a body. So Hinata was left alone with the little group of friends she had gathered outside the Akatsuki. Neji, Midori, Daisuke and Kabuto.

Upon their first meeting, Midori and Kabuto just nodded towards each other, completely indifferent. But Daisuke was staring at him shrewdly, suspiciously. "...Didn't you die?" he finally asked.

Hinata sighed when Kabuto replied with a curt "Yes."

The medic was skittish around them at first, but gradually he relaxed. Or he slipped his ever-calm, polite mask back on, and dealt with the situations as they occurred.

Today they were in a library, looking up battle tactics. It had been Daisuke's suggestion, and miraculously enough Neji had agreed. Surely the Akatsuki had some sort of plan for their assault on Konohagakure, but it wouldn't hurt to help. Plus Midori had to be briefed in such things. She was the Rain Lord, yet she had never really been in a full scale war. Then again, none of them were really old enough to have been. (Kabuto was, but he had been safely tucked away with his adoptive family in Konoha at the time of the war. They had been very protective of him, he told her.)

Hinata was nestled between Kabuto and Neji, idly flipping through a page of *Leaf Tactics Through The Wars*, listening to the thunder and rain outside. It looks like Konoha-nin had stayed pretty loyal to old styles through the years. Aside from the Hokages, who all seemed to excel in different things that were nothing like the majority of Leaf ninja. Each Hokage had their own chapter dedicated to them and their style and strong and weak points, interestingly enough. Hinata had to wonder who wrote this book.

"Hm, she's not that strong." Kabuto remarked casually, looking over her shoulder at the beginning of Tsunade's chapter.

She glanced at him, raising both eyebrows. "You've fought her?"

"No... but remember, I was Orochimaru's right-hand man. I know her techniques and style as well as most people, and I know things that she would never even imagine. I'm a better medic." he said, a little proudly. Hinata smiled, turning back to her book.

"Then how come *you're* not the Hokage?" Daisuke asked, peering up over the cover of the book he was reading. His red eyes glinted slightly from the lightning outside, and he didn't look incredibly impressed by Kabuto's declaration.

"Because. I—ah, *defected* from the village right before the Sandaime had died. I never got the chance, nor would I aspire to be something so asinine."

"Daisuke, just shut up. This is Amegakure, for gods' sakes! There *are* guys as strong as the Hokage or any other Kage here." Midori snapped shut her book, hitting her bodyguard on top of the head with the spine. He immediately went from suspicious to pathetic, whimpering like a kicked puppy.

"See what kind of abuse I get? I really hope that the entire village doesn't treat their jounin like this. I do nothing but offer my love and you hit me. That makes me feel really great, thanks, Midori-chan." he whined, tossing his book into the 'read' pile and picking up another.

"Do you ever act your age?" Neji asked flatly, turning a page in *The History of Ninja War*.

"Do you ever get abused by Hinata-chan? I think not. You two have a nice little cozy relationship, and I just get beat."

"Neji-san is right. Maybe if you acted a little more mature the girls wouldn't think so poorly of you. Grow up." Kabuto drawled, pushing his glasses up further on his nose. He smiled pleasantly as Daisuke bristled. Hinata had to bring up her book to hide her face; not even the infamously sarcastic Deidara could succeed in getting a word in edgewise with Daisuke, and here Kabuto was doing it almost effortlessly. Midori seemed to pick up on this as well.

Hinata decided to flip through the past Hokages. It wouldn't hurt to know a bit more about her (former) village's history, right? But she turned the page, and saw startling blue eyes and a mess of spiky, blonde hair. For a long moment, she had to remind herself that this *wasn't* Naruto. She hadn't realized how similar they looked... The Yondaime just stared coolly back out at her from the paper. His information lay below, and she scanned over it.

His last name wasn't Uzumaki.

So he wasn't related to Naruto, after all... even despite the shocking resemblance. Hinata could almost picture Naruto again, kind-hearted, non-Kyuubi Naruto... grinning and shouting to anyone who would listen how he would be Hokage one day... the same Naruto they were preparing to kidnap and murder.

She just kept her eyes open wide to stop the tears, and hastily turned to the Shodaime, pretending to be absorbed in his Mokuton abilities.

She had almost *forgotten* about Naruto... about the Kyuubi. But now, once they were finished sealing the eighth demon, they were going to attack Konohagakure with the sole purpose of extracting the hyperactive blonde. She didn't know what to think. She had long ago fallen out of love with him, but he was still a tender spot in her heart. The only thing she hoped for was that she didn't have to see him before they killed him.

Simultaneously, Neji casually reached over and grabbed her hand, and Kabuto shifted so that his

head was leaning against her shoulder. The sudden touches startled her, but she just gave her cousin's hand a squeeze, and rested her head on top of Kabuto's. She wasn't alone in this. Neji was there for her, he always had been, and he always would be. And Kabuto was just repaying her kindness.

Hinata ducked her head, trying hard not to laugh from the sheer happiness of it. Peeking out from under her bangs, she also saw that Midori was leaning casually against Daisuke's shoulder, her dark green eyes still scanning the page.

Life went on, even at the beginning of another shinobi war.

"Do you think that Pein-sama is going to allow Konan to participate in this attack?" Daisuke asked conversationally, looking up at the other three opposite them.

"She's halfway through her second trimester already..." Kabuto murmured, glancing up in his direction. "But he can't afford *not* to."

"It wouldn't look good if his second-in-command wasn't there at the attack." Neji added, nodding. He took his hand from Hinata's, flipping the page, and then returning it to hers as if it belonged there. (Maybe it did.)

"Sunagakure is probably going to send ninja up once they hear of it, though. And they're on the other side of Amegakure compared to Konoha. Someone will have to stay back here with a part of our forces to keep off any other would-be invaders and defend the village." Midori pointed out, looking at Neji with a slightly argumentative gleam in suddenly icy eyes.

"That's true." he replied shortly. "They'll probably launch a retaliation attack once they get in contact with Konoha. Which is why a lot of people are going to be on hawk-watch for awhile, killing any birds that could be messengers."

"Konan-senpai says that she's going to be going along with the assault, pregnant or not." Hinata said quietly, wondering how someone could have developed Mokuton abilities. "She doesn't want to be thought of as a liability to the organization."

Kabuto snorted, bringing up his hand to hastily cover his laugh. Nearly everyone jumped at the sudden sound, and turned to stare at him with a mix of horrified curiosity and amazement. Daisuke then burst out laughing as well, and exclaimed, "Oh my—Kabuto *can* laugh! I guess he's human after all."

"No, I normally don't laugh like this... but it's just so *funny*. Women always get hysterical when they're pregnant. To think that one of the world's strongest kunoichi is scared that she'd be a *liability*... it's funny." Kabuto kept his mouth covered, resulting in his voice sounding a bit muffled. "And they always seem to think that their husbands or lovers or whoever... are angry with them for getting pregnant. Because ninja seem to think that it's so wrong to give life instead of taking it..."

"Hmm, I wonder what Pein-sama *does* think of this whole thing..." Neji murmured. He was the only one not looking at Kabuto, instead still carelessly flipping pages in the book he was reading.

Hinata cocked her head, trying to imagine the shadowy leader of the Akatsuki as anything but stoic and unfeeling. And yet... she had seen that he would smile at his partner. He didn't seem angry or anything. Was he... happy? "...I'll see if Deidara-kun knows what his position is. Wouldn't it be cute if he wanted the baby, too?"

"That would be adorable!" Midori squealed. "A little baby god... like a godling! I bet Konan-sama would make a wonderful mother if she would just give herself a chance..."

"Pein-sama would make a very protective father. No one would get near that child he didn't like." Hinata giggled, hiding her face with her book. Both girls started laughing, trying to imagine the previously stoic and mysterious Pein and Konan as parents.

"Looks like we've found who will be babysitting most often." Daisuke said, jerking his thumb towards Midori. "A 'godling'. Sheesh. You'd think she's the one having the kid, how excited she is..."

"I'm still *here*, Ikari Daisuke. Don't talk to your commanding officer like that." she retorted, completely serious once more. Daisuke gave the others a 'see what I have to deal with?' face, resigning himself to be hit several more times with the nearest book.

"Commanding officer my ass... bodyguard! Partners! Throw me a bone here."

"We've known each other less than a month! Don't get flippant with me, kid."

"Oh, you're trying to act high and mighty, how cute!" Daisuke cooed. It was hard to tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

Kabuto was new to their style of conversation, so as he was quieting his laughter and smiles, he asked, "Do they always fight like that?"

"Yes. They're secretly in love. Midori-san is just in denial." Hinata stated matter-of-factly. The brunette girl went bright red, turning an icy-eyed glare on her.

"I'll have you executed for disrespect! Both of you!" she snapped, turning away to hide her face.

Neji calmly moved in front of Hinata, telling her in a similar business-like tone, "If you do that, I'll have to kill you. With all due respect, but Hinata-sama also has a bodyguard."

"And so does Midori-chan." Daisuke chirped, mirroring the move. "I seem to recall that last time we fought I came out on top, Neji."

"Would you care to test whether or not it was luck, Sanada?" he asked coldly.

"Okay, I'm thinking I am suddenly rather hungry." Kabuto said lazily, rolling his eyes at the show of masculinity. Running his thumb over his bottom lip, he added, "Hinata-chan, would you like to accompany me to a restaurant?"

"Y-Yes, of course." They stood up, and Hinata grabbed Neji's sleeve to stop him from getting into a fight with Daisuke. Midori likewise calmed her guard dog, though admittedly by hitting him on the head with yet another book.

"Come on. You two aren't allowed to fight. And you're not sitting by each other in the restaurant."

"You sure do change moods really fast..." Daisuke complained, letting himself be dragged out of the library. "Sure you're not pregnant as well, Midori-chan?"

Daisuke was promptly smacked again and left to fend for himself after that.

Deidara was sweating buckets all throughout the sealing. Mostly for two reason. The first was that this was the closest he had been to Sasori since the redhead had practically confessed his love—if it could be called that. He still wasn't sure what the hell it was supposed to be. It might've been a perverse, demented way to get Deidara to leave him alone for awhile. (And if that was the case, it was sure doing its job.)

Thank the gods that they were separated by most of the other members. Since Sasori's position was on the left thumb and Deidara was the right index finger, they couldn't have been farther apart unless Deidara switched fingers with Pein.

Pathetically enough, that wasn't his only problem. It was just coming home for most of the members that this was the *last* demon before the Kyuubi. And that was the last out of everything. No more sealing, no more staying awake for days on end pouring chakra into a giant nine-eyed statue, no more hunting down Jinchuuriki. Deidara didn't know all of the details of the plan after that, but he didn't really care. He figured he'd just follow orders and ask questions as he thought of them.

The blonde explosives expert glanced over his shoulder, down the row. Konan didn't look fazed in the least at her obvious chakra exhaustion. Was she even really worried about the baby? Did chakra affect unborn babies? Or was she not even trying, letting the rest of them take out most of the chakra?

Past the kunoichi, Itachi was stoically staring ahead at the monstrous jail of the Bijuu. (Now approximately seven and a half were housed in it.) Did he even know that he was raised to do this, be Akatsuki and sacrifice his chakra to some god-like structure?

Deidara shook his head, and instead returned to the task at hand. That was the problem with this. He had gotten so used to this sealing that it'd allow his mind to wander. Who cared whether or not Itachi and himself were Pein's little pet project. He thought too much, anyway.

"Hey, why is everyone so quiet? Shouldn't we be like, celebrating or some shit like that?" Kakuzu shouted suddenly.

Pein irritably replied from his position below Deidara, "If you have time for chitchat, then you obviously aren't pulling your weight in this, Kakuzu."

"I'm pulling plenty of weight. I'm just wondering why we're not more excited about this." the treasurer grumbled, still loud enough for everyone to hear quite clearly.

His partner, on the finger beside him, spoke up in agreement. "Yeah... this poor bastard, and then another poor bastard, and then we get to kill a whole bunch of poor bastards. *Shouldn't* we be celebratin'? We've gotten totally fucking plastered after every other demon, so why aren't we jumping for joy and clicking our heels together right about now?"

"Save it for the Kyuubi." Pein ordered flatly. "And we still have a little less than half of the Hachibi's chakra to seal, so shove it and concentrate!"

"... Yeah, but—"

"The leader told you to shove it, so shut the hell up already! You're giving me a headache." Konan snapped. Deidara suddenly didn't feel very safe, between her and Pein.

"And—"

"You too." Konan interrupted the ginger-haired man, much to his obvious surprise. When he didn't speak again, there were several snickers throughout the two hands.

"Leader-sama is *whipped*."

"You just got told, Leader-sama!"

"It's obvious who's wearing the pants in this relationship..."

"Okay, shut your mouths before I kill you all." Pein shouted furiously, and that stopped most of the remarks, at least. "We'd probably already be done if it wasn't for this stupidity..."

Deidara just ducked his head, using his high collar to hide his silent laughter. Who knew the Akatsuki was this much fun? And obviously whoever designed the uniforms knew what he was doing...

He looked down the line of Akatsuki members again, to see if anyone else was still trying to stop from laughing. Farthest away, however, Deidara could have sworn that Sasori was staring back at him. The blonde hastily straightened back up, feeling most of the blood drain out of his face. *Damn that man to hell, messing with me and my emotions...*

-.-.-

Almost a week later, the eighth Bijuu was completely sealed into its prison.

And then the Akatsuki began its real war preparations with the village.

All ninja were ordered to kill any flying bird on sight, just in case it was a messenger or a spy. Most of this was left to the younger ninja, since they thought it was great fun. No more immigrants or refugees were taken in (excluding non-ninja). Most training was doubled, in a last-ditch effort to improve.

Since Amegakure didn't have official ANBU, Midori was put in charge of finding out who was ex-ANBU and speaking to them about the armor that they wore. ANBU armor was notoriously good at being lightweight and strong, so whatever could be found was greatly useful.

Pein had been giving speeches every other day to help with morale. He encouraged each shinobi to wear their old, scored hitai-ates, to show that they were once of a different village, but that they had come together to form a new, more welcoming alliance. All different kinds of headbands went on, and ninja were wearing them proudly now. Only those natural Ame-ninja had rain symbols anymore.

Weapons were being made and tested faster than ever, boosting the economy for a short time. Kunai and shuriken were being bought by the dozens, and those ex-ANBU that could be found were hastily recruited into teaching others how to create their special armor and swords. Even the animal masks were becoming quite popular among the Ame ninja.

In addition to improving the economic structure of the village (because while war was generally good for business, civil war and demon catching sprees were *not*), the very sudden impending loom of war seemed to be making the shinobi behave quite... erratically. They were pairing up faster than ever, proposals and marriages happening by the dozens. The general consensus was that they

might as well be with their loved one now, when they could easily die on the battlefield in a week.

No doubt in about nine months there would be quite a large baby boom as well.

Hinata felt a little left-out, if she was being honest with herself. She saw kunoichi and civilians alike shopping for wedding dresses and kimonos, while she was trying to track down some ANBU armor to fit her. In fact, while she was talking to a store clerk about finding some armguards, a man proposed to his eventual fiancée in the shop. She couldn't talk to the clerk for the next twenty minutes because of all of the congratulations going around.

No one was going to be doing that to *her* anytime soon. Hinata just walked out, deciding to take her business elsewhere. Not for lack of courtesy, but more for lack of wanting to interrupt their happiness with her own gloominess. The happy couple didn't deserve to be rained upon by her. Plus she'd only get weepy if she thought about it, or if *they* started crying, or if they made wedding plans or something...

Hinata shook her head, pulling her braid back under her hood as she donned it in the pouring rain. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts... She wondered if Pein would propose to Konan. Or if he already had. Or if he thought he was too cool or godlike or something to be tied down in such a mundane, normal thing as a marriage.

Marriage... such a normal thing. Usually shinobi didn't get married until after they retired—or (accidentally) got pregnant. Still, Hinata knew she had always wanted a family. Lots of children, a nice, supporting husband, and she would be perfectly happy being a housewife. Stupid kunoichi stuff got in the way now...

After all of this Bijuu stuff was over and the world calmed down a bit, Hinata would retire.

No more stupid not-having-emotions-but-having-them-anyway-when-it-suited-them, no more dangerous missions, no more fighting...

But for the moment, Hinata just needed a pair of armguards. Well and shin guards, but she was slowly piecing together a full ANBU ensemble. Maybe she'd even wear the old bunny mask from Deidara's Bijuu mission, too... Another jacket would be good, too. Overtop everything.

The Hyuuga heiress just continued browsing, deciding on a whim to stop by Neji's later on and see if he knew anywhere that sold armguards. (And shin guards.) She knew that he would be in on this campaign as well—they had almost gotten into an argument earlier concerning it—but at least he could take care of himself. Usually. Most of the time. Okay, so she'd be desperately worried about him, but selfishly she was counting a little bit on the fact that he was a Hyuuga to protect him from a lot of Konoha soldiers. They might have to do a double-take when fighting him, and that would be all he'd need.

Hinata stepped inside of another shop, just to get out of the rain for a little bit. Her hair had grown out again (thank the gods that Neji's had, too; secretly she missed his long hair, and while it wasn't as long as it had been, at least it was past his shoulders again) and a wet braid dripping down her back she could only take in small amounts.

"Hello! How may I help you, Hinata-chan?"

"Oh, I'm just brows—" Hinata did a double take when she saw Kabuto leaning casually against the counter, looking distantly amused at her surprise. "Kabuto-kun! What are you doing here? Do-Do you work here?" For the first time, she looked around the little shop. It seemed to be selling various medical supplies, herbs, and ingredients. It would make sense that the medic-nin would want to

work in a place like this.

"No." Or maybe he didn't work here. "Actually I had just sent the owner into the back for a few of the rarer ingredients... he'll be back soon, don't worry."

"N-No! I just came in here to get out of the rain." she said quickly, blushing. Then she caught onto his words, and had to ask, "Um... ingredients for what?"

"Sasori-sama has complained of chakra exhaustion and can't even run his own errands. He wants to restock on his poisons, for the assault on Konohagakure, I assume." the silver-haired spy drawled, sounding bored with the whole proceeding. He pushed off of the counter, one hand coming up to absently brush against his bottom lip in thought. "I guess I just wasn't aware that I was his personal errand boy now... he's as bad as Orochimaru sometimes, I swear." Kabuto gave her a disarming smile. Maybe she had gotten better at reading him, or maybe she just knew what to look for, but these days she could usually see through his fake expressions.

"So you're just here for those things? What kind of ingredients does he use for his poisons...?" Hinata asked curiously. Deidara had told her on several occasions when his partner had stabbed him with something poisoned that Sasori was one of the best poison-makers in the world. Whether or not that was biased was up for debate, but she knew that she didn't want to be on the other end of his attacks. Not again, anyway.

"I couldn't even begin to pronounce half the names, and I don't think he'd like it much if I told you, Hinata-chan." Right, so she was still in the dark on several Akatsuki matters. She didn't have to be reminded of that little fact like *that*. "Plus a few of the things I want. Soldier pills, for instance..." Kabuto let his voice drift off, gesturing with one hand.

"Right." Hinata looked down at her sandals, shifting her feet sheepishly. She didn't know if it was intentional or not, but most of her annoyance at him dissolved when she was reminded about his predicament. Kabuto probably planned on that, though, the manipulative jerk.

"That reminds me. Did you like your gift?" he asked, though obviously just for conversation's sake. He didn't seem particularly thrilled at the turn the conversation had taken, even if it was his own fault.

"...Huh? What gift?"

Kabuto laughed. "And here I thought the purple wrapping would have given it away..."

It took a few moments to click, but when it did Hinata gasped dramatically. "It was *you*?! You're the one who snuck into my room and left that gift, Kabuto-kun?"

"When you phrase it like that, it sounds a little criminal, you know..."

"I-I loved it!" she amended hastily. No wonder she hadn't figured out who left that mystery gift. Kabuto told her so casually, so maybe it hadn't even been a secret, too. "I've been looking for lotions like that for a-awhile now, where did you find them in Amegakure? They were really good—oh and the exfoliating cream was amazing, th-thank you!" Hinata hurriedly bowed, nearly dropping her shopping bag.

When she came back up, Kabuto looked amused again. Well, 'amused' wouldn't ever be the word to properly describe a being like Kabuto, but it was the closest she could get to describing him without making up a term. (He was a lot like that with his emotions and expressions, she'd noticed throughout her time with him.) "I didn't find them in Amegakure, you know. I make them myself."

he told her, a little bit proud of this fact.

Hinata gasped again. Not only because she would have never pictured him as the type to do something so kind for others, but because that would have to be one of the greatest skills ever in the history of ninja. She'd used to make ointments and the like, but she only ever got as far as healing balms. "R-Really?!"

"Yes, really. I like looking how I do." He pulled off a glove, and showed her. Unlike every other shinobi she'd met, his hands were smooth and flawless, comparable only to a kunoichi's or a genin's. Those didn't look like the hands of a killer. Come to think of it, Kabuto didn't have any scars or any abnormalities on the rare glimpses she'd gotten of his skin. Even with such horrific injuries like the ones Kakuzu had inflicted, he was always looking completely perfect. He and Sasori had that in common, then, even if neither of them would admit it willingly. "Medical skills are only half of it. I'll admit that I'm somewhat shallow to think so, but I don't care much at this point. I like my skin perfect." Kabuto put his glove back on, flexing his fingers to make sure it was on right.

"It's not shallow! A lot of ninja think the same way, and I think it's lovely that not all shinobi are so careless about how they look."

Kabuto smirked slyly, pushing his glasses up. "When you spend so much time with the men of the Akatsuki? A lot of them seem to have quite a few fans in the village, you know. I bet Deidara spends a fair amount of attention on his hair."

"W-Well, I mean... they're special cases, really... It's just like how in Konoha, K-Kiba-kun wouldn't ever care about any scars he would get, or anything... a lot of men have scars these days. Like Kakuzu, and Kakashi, and I'm sure Hidan would have a lot..." she finished lamely. That had been pretty awkward. Hinata decided to retreat while she could still salvage some semblance of dignity.

Though Kabuto made a good point. There really weren't any visible scars on any Akatsuki member—except Kakuzu's bizarre stitched-up *things* on his body. Either they were incredibly vain or strong enough to avoid injuries. Probably a mixture of both.

The store owner came back at that point, handing Kabuto a few little bottles and boxes of various things. He divided out a few, and put them in separate bags, and thanked the owner. "Oh, Hinata-chan... since you're headed back to the Akatsuki tower, would you mind terribly dropping this off with Sasori-sama? There's a pressing experiment I have that should be finishing soon, and I'd like to be there to record observations right away."

"Um, actually—"

"Great, thank you. Oh and please tell Sasori-sama that it wouldn't hurt him if he actually spoke to Deidara again." Kabuto handed her the bag, the contents of which would probably kill her in several different painful ways, and cheerily disappeared out the door and into the rain.

Hinata glared flatly at the spot where he had vanished, thinking, *he did that on purpose...*

-.-.-

Sasori managed to roll out of bed long enough to stand up, stagger over to the door, open it and

collapse back onto his bed when he saw that it was only the Hyuuga girl. "Oh. It's you."

"Don't sound so thrilled to see me..." she muttered, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. She dutifully dropped a bag of something on his work desk, reciting, "Kabuto-kun says that these are the ingredients for your poisons that you requested. And he says that you should speak to Deidara-kun again. I don't even know what you two are fighting about this time..."

Sasori snorted, and she looked up in flat shock from the unexpected burst of character. "Deidara... that's *his* problem right now. He actually is the one who started this... *fight*, if it can be called such a word. Ask him why he's avoiding me, then."

"Umm... okay..."

"Now, since I know you're probably going to go see Deidara soon, could you please stop at Itachi's along the way and give him this? It's the sedative he wanted." Too lazy to get up again, Sasori just picked it up with a chakra string and tossed the little vial to her. Hinata looked mildly outraged at the request.

"Actually, I hadn't planned on—"

"I'll let you in on a secret if you do that little favor for me, Hinata-hime." he interrupted smoothly, snuggling into his blanket a little. He may not feel physical touch anymore, but god damn it, it felt good to be on a bed after sealing the Hachibi. He could only imagine what a strain the Kyuubi would be on the organization... It could be a bit of a problem if they were all too tired to get out of bed and Konohagakure decided to retaliate. Oh well. He was too tired to worry much about the future right now.

Hinata was looking like she was having an inner debate, narrowing her white eyes suspiciously. "...What kind of secret...?" she finally asked, giving in to temptation.

"A secret concerning Deidara." he said quietly, closing his eyes and allowing his body to rest.

"...Tell me now and then I'll do the errand."

"No, because you won't."

"Yes I will."

"No you won't."

"Yes, I will!"

"No, you won't. Come back later and I'll tell you." Sasori shooed her out the door, much to her annoyance.

-.-.-

Itachi groaned loudly when he heard a knock on the door. He had *just* gotten to sleep, and then someone had the audacity to wake him up. Unless there was an extremely good reason for it, someone was about to die. Running a hand through his black hair to attempt to tame the slight bed head, and blinking to try to adjust to the darkness in his room, the eldest Uchiha groggily got up to

answer the door.

Hyuuga Hinata got to be on the receiving end of his wrath. Lucky her.

"*What.*" he bit out, close to slamming the door in her face. Honestly, if she wanted another last genjutsu lesson before the campaign...

"Sasori-san said to give this to you. It's the sedative you wanted?" She hesitantly offered up a small glass vial, looking like she'd be anywhere other than here at that moment. Itachi plucked the vial from her hands, holding it up to the light. Even his regular eyesight was getting a little fuzzy when his chakra was strained...

"...Good. Thank you. Goodbye." Now back to his nap.

Hinata looked like she was about to say something for a moment, but then apparently decided better of it and gave him a little bow. "Sorry for disturbing you."

"Hm." Itachi was about to leave her, when he remembered that he had borrowed Kakuzu's book earlier. It wasn't to his tastes, so he may as well return it now. And if she was running errands... "Actually, could you return this book to Kakuzu for me? And how has Kisho been?"

"He's fine—but well, you see—"

One look was all it took to silence her. She meekly took the book from him, and departed, looking like he had put the fear of god in her. Well he probably had, but that was beside the point. Finally, back to bed.

-.-.-

Hinata, in short, had somehow been recruited into running errands for the Akatsuki. Or most of them, at least. And it annoyed her to no end. Yes, she knew that they were tired, and she would be too if she had just sealed the eight-tailed demon. But it was just crazy! She had been to Sasori's room twice more, and he refused to tell her the supposed secret, Hidan had suggested none-too-subtly that he'd like some female company, and Tobi was so full of pep it was a wonder that it wasn't spreading like some sort of disease.

And she hadn't even seen Deidara once during that time.

The first disruption in the cycle she got, Hinata ran for it. She didn't flee to Kabuto, because he was the one who started it all, and she didn't dare even try to find Deidara, for fear that he would drag her into something else. She just wanted a real *break*.

So Hinata donned her rain cloak and went out into the darkened rain to try to find Neji.

Proposals, poisons and stupid lazy Akatsuki. Well, okay, none of them were stupid; they were all geniuses. And they weren't *lazy*, just tired... Hinata was tiring herself out just defending them in her head. She wearily trudged through the rain and the mud in the direction of the hotel that Neji was (still) staying at, having forgotten her umbrella. Oh well; she had a hood.

She knocked on his room's door, the number glinting familiarly in the dull light. No answer, so she knocked again. Then she put her ear up against the door. No sound whatsoever. Activating her

Byakugan, she found the room to be empty, so she traipsed back downstairs to ask the woman at the desk if she had seen Neji or if he was out.

"I'm sorry, miss, but Hyuuga-san no longer lives here. He checked out a few days ago." the woman sighed, sounding as tired as Hinata suddenly felt.

"...What?" Hinata said dully, unsure if she had heard her correctly over the storm outside.

"Hyuuga-san no longer lives here. This is just a *hotel*, miss. Now unless *you* want to rent a room please go, you're keeping other customers away."

There was no one else in the room.

But still Hinata left, feeling a little numb. He had... left? Or moved? Or what? He hadn't informed her of this decision, to say the least. She didn't bother to put her hood back up, and just wandered back in the general direction of the Akatsuki tower. Had he left on a mission? But no, the Akatsuki wasn't giving out any missions this close to the war. There was no real reason for him to suddenly check out, unless something had happened...or unless he hadn't wanted her to know.

Had she just been abandoned?

Had she done something to offend him, or to drive him away? Was something wrong with her? Or was he trying to protect her from something?

Hinata glanced up as a pair of people walked by. She recognized them as the couple from before, in the shop, that had just gotten engaged. They were holding hands. A silver ring glittered on the woman's finger.

Hinata suddenly felt like crying. In fact, that's just what she did. She pulled up her hood, ignoring the small pool of cold rainwater it dumped down her back, and ducked into an alleyway. She braced herself against the wet brick, feeling utterly alone and abandoned. Everyone was leaving her.

Kabuto was dying, Deidara was nowhere to be found, and now Neji had just left without a word. She had already left behind her old teammates and friends. There wasn't anyone else in the Rain she could really call a 'friend'.

Hinata wanted to curl up, but she knew she'd just feel worse later on if she sat in a puddle to cry. It'd be too sad to do that, even for how she was feeling now. Over the pitter-patter of the raindrops, she heard something to her left, and then a faint sound. Sniffling, she looked over her shoulder—to see two large, green eyes, and a soaked grey body.

"*Meow*," Kisho greeted her with a whine, shaking from the rain.

"Ki-Kisho! What are you doing out in this rain, baby?!" Hinata felt too sorry for her cat to be surprised. But if Neji left, he may have accidentally or purposely left the cat behind to fend for itself. She gently picked up the soaked feline, drying him off as best she could with her damp jacket. Kisho didn't even bother shedding on her, just snuggled up into her chest to try to keep out of the rain. "Ohh, you poor kitty... did Neji leave you alone, too? Are you all alone in this big, scary world?"

Kisho just meowed, shivering against her. She rubbed his wet fur, and looked around for some place that wasn't closed and allowed animals.

"Poor, poor kitty-cat, Neji just left us both behind, it's wet and it's cold, and now we're both feeling

alone, aren't we? Poor Kisho, poor kitty..."

Kisho mewed at her, looking up at her with large, green eyes.

"Yes, I'm sad that Neji left, too. I-I mean, why would he leave... it's just a sad thing, Kisho. The world is sad right now. See? It's even crying for us, and our pathetic little state. Left behind for the one supposed to care for us, and love us, and never leave us..."

Kisho made a sound like he might have been laughing, from a cat's standpoint, at least. Hinata playfully batted him on the head, and he responded by head butting her collarbone. "Meow."

"Right, you smug little kitty... let's go home, shall we?"

In response, the cat jumped down from her arms and landed in a puddle, much to his annoyance. He looked up at her with large, green eyes, and then ran down the street. Hinata chased after her lone companion, shouting, "Kisho! Come back here!"

The cat stopped in his tracks, and sat down in the rain. She was a bit surprised, but then he just got up and darted off again when she got close. This continued, until Hinata just about gave up with the cat's little game. It was leading her nowhere, anyway. She only vaguely knew where she was anymore, and she and Kisho were both getting even wetter, if it was at all possible.

He darted around a corner, and she practically tripped over herself to catch back up to him. That little feline was *fast* when he wanted to be. She only glimpsed the tip of his black tail as he disappeared again, and she paused for a moment to catch her breath, bending over and putting her hands on her knees to support herself.

Great... now even an animal had abandoned her.

Then Hinata felt a coat on her shoulders, and bolted upright. She nearly collided with her startled gentleman. "Oh, sorry—oh." Her voice cut off involuntarily when she recognized him.

Neji blinked back at her, his expression perfectly blank. "What are you doing out in this rain?"

Hinata looked down at her feet, where Kisho was staring complacently back up at her. "You... you left Kisho behind."

"No, actually he had run off... I'm glad you found him. It'd be sad if you lost your pet, wouldn't it be?" he asked, wrapping the coat more firmly around her. "You'll catch pneumonia yet, with all of this rain..."

"...Y-You left *me* behind..." Hinata whispered, half-hoping he wouldn't hear her over the raindrops. She was glad that the rain hid her tears, at least. Why did he reappear *now*, of all times? He was the one who left, after all.

"Hm? When did I do that, Hinata?" Neji put his arm around her shoulders, steering her towards the nearest building with eaves, out of the rain. Kisho followed at their heels, shaking water out of his fur.

Hinata realized that she must have been overreacting, and instead of answering, just reddened and ducked her head.

"...I was tired of living in a hotel." he said by way of explanation. "And I wanted my *own* place. And what with the war preparations... prices are down now. Thought I may as well make myself comfortable when I can."

"Y-You still left Kisho behind..." she mumbled, bending down to pick up the soggy cat. He politely shed over her, though the drips from her clothes washed most of it off.

"He ran out earlier today. I was looking for him when I found you both instead. I'm sorry if it doesn't seem like I'm taking very good care of him." Neji replied evenly, petting Kisho on the head. He got a handful of wet fur for his troubles.

"Why didn't you tell me that you moved? I-I was worried." She glanced up at him out of the corner of her eye shyly. He looked back down at her, trying his hardest not to smirk when she caught him looking at her and hastily turned away.

"I didn't think it would affect you that much. Usually you don't come visit me, it is the other way around."

"That's not true. I-I come visit you as often as I can!" Now it sounded like she was defending herself. The heiress hugged Kisho tighter to her and petted the cat frenetically. "I'm sorry if it doesn't seem like that often..."

"It's not your fault. I'm sorry for moving without informing you of it first." he replied ambiguously. After a long pause, in which the two just watched the night rain, he added quietly, "And I'm sorry for worrying you, Hinata. You know I don't like to do that excessively."

"I'm sorry for overreacting." It seemed as if they were just trading apologies, now.

But instead of apologizing for some other insignificant thing that didn't need apologizing for, Neji just turned her towards him, and put one finger under her chin to make her look up at him. "You don't overreact, you know. ...But I like it when you worry about me."

Kisho jumped down and disappeared with a complaining meow. Because Hinata had been squishing him when she pressed up against Neji when they kissed.

-.-.-

The next morning, Neji and Hinata managed to get into an argument. Which was quite sad, considering they were just now getting over much of their awkwardness and were finally becoming comfortable with each other.

"If you're going, then I am too!"

"No, you're not. I can't protect you in the midst of a large-scale battle!"

"I am not going to let you go off and get killed in a war when I'm just staying here!"

"I'm not going to get killed, Hinata! I am going to fight to protect this village—and you—and I can't be distracted while *I'm* worrying about *you*!"

"I am just as good of a fighter as you are, Hyuuga Neji, even if I can't fight like a proper Hyuuga! Itachi-senpai said that I'm at a jounin level now for my genjutsu!"

"Jounin or not, you just don't have the experience needed. You are *not* going to war, and that's final!"

So being the mature, level-headed kunoichi that she was, Hinata decided to run off to Deidara to get him on her side of the argument. She caught him in his room, snoring loudly. When he awoke, he looked guilty; obviously he expected to be reprimanded for disappearing yesterday. But instead, he just got an earful of a classic Hyuuga argument.

"—And please tell him that I'm coming, too! I have the Byakugan, too, and I can fight just as well as you two!"

"...Umm, what made you think that you were going in the first place, Bya-chan? Regardless of your fighting ability, yeah."

Hinata looked completely aghast. Neji just smirked slightly, obviously having figured out prior that Deidara wouldn't dare let her anywhere near a full-out battle. She looked betrayed by them both, and then a loud argument started between her and both males about whether or not she was going on this campaign.

Unfortunately, it was settled in the worst way possible.

They got so loud that half the Akatsuki was listening in, and Konan decided to intervene. The pregnant woman irritably told Hinata that she was staying behind, just so these two wouldn't get their heads cut off while they were trying to keep a watch on her. Hinata was nearly in tears, and she just fled for the last relatively safe haven she had; Kabuto.

He just handed her the ANBU armguards she had been looking for earlier, told her that shin guards were too heavy to be of much use, and informed her to wear her bunny mask and a hood.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The last chapter before the campaign begins! Hidden misgivings, last-minute apologies, sarcastic replies and an underlying excitement beneath it all. Midori and Daisuke hunt birds. Kabuto and Sasori have a chat. Pein remarks that he likes Konan when she's pregnant. Deidara tries to figure out what the hell is up with his life. Hinata secretly prepares for war while trying to make it seem like she's not to Neji. And then the thoughts of Tsunade...

Memoirs of the Damned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

During the next week, life was hectic and unforgiving. Ninja got into fights over the tiniest things, usually resulting in severe injuries, if not death. Pein himself was forced to step in on several occasions. He finally stopped much of it by giving a grand speech to the majority of his soldiers.

And then... it was announced one day, after his precious Akatsuki had rested up to full strength, the next day they would march.

-.-.-

Midori jumped guiltily when she heard a voice behind her ask, "And what are you doing up here, miss Rain Lord?"

The brunette turned around to face her bodyguard, instantly scowling at him. "I am just watching for any more messenger hawks."

"You'd think that they wouldn't be stupid enough to fly over Amegakure..." Daisuke muttered, climbing up onto the roof to sit beside her.

"They have to. There are so many lakes and rivers in this country; Amegakure has the only suitable forest for roosting at night in the area. Unless they want to fly even more out of their way south, this is the only real route between Suna and Konoha that's practical." she explained offhandedly. The Rain Lord just shrugged and reclined slightly on the roof, smiling into the rain. "Pein-sama says that it's to our advantage."

"A lot of things are to our advantage. It seems kind of... grand to have the whole village mobilize when probably just the Akatsuki could go." he said vaguely, tapping his fingers on his knee. Midori sat up and gave him a sharp look with ice green eyes.

"Don't insinuate such things. We're going to be fighting Konohagakure in its entirety, and on their own ground. Not to mention Suna and Kiri reinforcements when they arrive."

"Oh, so Kiri *is* joining the war..." he murmured. "...Regardless, when you actually think about it —"

"Don't start up with some crackpot theory. Just trust in Pein-sama. You may be new around here, but he is still the strongest man alive and he's the closest thing to a god we have." She lay back down with a grunt, crossing her legs.

"I'm just saying. There's the Hokage and Jiraiya to worry about, yes, but Naruto couldn't get into the fight, and the Kyuubi is one of the Leaf's greatest weapons. They can't risk him. Kakashi can probably take one of the members, and I've heard that Gai has fought Kisame before, too, and plus he's strong as hell. But not all of the jounin are up to par with them. Ten Akatsuki members would, in theory, be enough to take down Konoha." Daisuke said patiently, staring up at the overcast sky. She halfheartedly smacked him on the shoulder.

"You are an idiot, Ikari Daisuke. Konan-sama can't fight, so that means that there would only be nine functioning members, anyway. The Leaf would possess raw numbers that we couldn't match without our own forces. They already outnumber us, anyway. And Itachi-sama is going to be busy looking for the Kyuubi kid, so he's going to be unable to get into much of the fighting."

"Hey, when this is all over, do you want to go on a date with me?" Daisuke asked suddenly, giving her a grin. She blanched, and then slowly reddened, sticking her tongue out at him.

"This relationship is purely professional!"

"Then we can have the date when we're off-duty."

"No!"

"Come on. Am I that bad of a guy?"

"Well, no, but—it's irrelevant! I'm not going on a date with you."

"You're blushing." Daisuke teased, ruffling her wet hair. Midori glowered at him, but of course, the comment only made it worse. "Just think about it. I'm sure after all of this fighting you'll want a break."

"You're treating me like a kid." she complained, crossing her arms.

"No, I'm treating you like a girl I like. Okay, that and I like to tease people." he allowed with a sharp-toothed grin.

With a huff, she ducked under his hand and turned away. "You're an idiot."

"Coming from you, I know that's a term of endearment full of love."

"Jerk."

-.-.-

"It's unusual that *you* come to *me* for a safe haven, Sasori-sama." Unusual was the last thing he would have thought of to describe the situation. Frankly, it scared Kabuto out of his wits. The redhead shook out his umbrella, closing it as he stepped into the darkened laboratory. "...Is something the matter?"

"I understand that you've let the Hyuuga girl borrow your old ANBU gear." Sasori said quietly, giving the lab a cursory glance before setting his flat gaze on his spy. Well, ex-spy...

Kabuto gave him an obviously fake smile. That was part of how he acted around his supposed superiors. Fake emotions anyway, even though they both knew that it was a completely useless façade. "I don't see why she should be forced to stay behind. She'd come along, anyway."

Sasori shook his head in slight disbelief. "You're becoming too attached to her. She's taken, anyway."

Kabuto laughed. "I haven't become 'too attached' to anyone. Well, one person, and it's not Hyuuga Hinata, I can assure you, Sasori-sama." Becoming too attached to someone was the ninja

euphemism for falling in love. *Sort of*. "It's not anything like you and Deidara, if I may be so bold as to say..."

"You're out of line." he said immediately, narrowing his eyes.

"I apologize, Sasori-sama." Of course, he was the furthest thing from sorry. Sasori knew that too.

"You just want Deidara to get distracted."

"Why? Have you told him?"

"No, of course not. But sooner or later he'll figure out she's there, and then he'll get distracted, and I'll be too busy keeping him out of trouble to keep an eye on *you*. Plan on sneaking off to visit a certain Konoha-nin?" Sasori kept his voice low and eyes narrowed to slits. The medic was unfazed. He was used to Sasori, after all. They'd known each other for over twenty years. For being raised by two Akatsuki members and a stand-in father who was completely oblivious, Kabuto was glad that he turned out how he did.

Even if Sasori still knew him too well.

"Oh, you got me. My plan was exactly that, in all of its simplicity." he informed him artlessly.

"Now whatever shall I do with myself during this war, if I cannot sneak off under Sasori-sama's ever-watchful gaze to go gallivanting around with Kakashi?"

"Don't get flippant with me. You no longer have Orochimaru to hide behind." he snapped irritably, jerking his head to the side to avoid looking at his subordinate. Kabuto smirked to himself. Deidara was wearing the puppeteer down and he wasn't even *here*... he'd have to thank the Iwa-nin one day. Oh, life was so amusing sometimes.

"I never hid behind Orochimaru..." Kabuto fielded the remark vaguely, leaning against one of his lab tables. It was *technically* true. He never hid behind the Sannin, because it was hard to hide from Sasori by using his partner, even though they didn't speak anymore at that point. "...But we've digressed from the point at hand. Why are you suddenly curious as to why I gave Hinata my old gear?"

"Because it will just uselessly complicate things."

"Don't worry. You worry too much anyway, Sasori-sama. I'll keep her back with me and the other medics, out of most of the fighting. You just complicate on protecting your precious little Deidara."

"...Do you have a death wish, Kabuto?" Sasori hissed, his mouth curving upward into a dangerous smile. "You like to think that you're protected, just because you're on a time limit anyway, but you should learn not to screw around with ninja stronger than you."

"...No innuendo intended, I hope. I'll learn my lesson eventually, regardless. Maybe." Maybe he did have a death wish, that is. He just shrugged casually. Sasori liked to act a lot tougher than he was, at least around Kabuto. Both of them were, if they were being honest to the situation. But shinobi were never honest, and they just trusted each other to know that by now. "I'll behave. I won't cause any unnecessary trouble. I just have a few loose ends to tie up is all, really. Is it so bad for a dying man to do that?"

Sasori sighed, running a hand through his hair. He looked utterly defeated, an expression only Kabuto could bring about anymore, now that Orochimaru was dead. "Kabuto... it's useless to try to play these games this late in your life."

"I've been playing these games for twenty years, Sasori-sama. It's too late for me to stop. Just let me finish the ones I can."

"Do what you will. Just don't drag anyone else down with you."

Kabuto leaned back, facing the ceiling. He just smiled to himself, listening as Sasori left him to his own devices once more. Yes, for being raised by two Akatsuki members and an oblivious faux father... he turned out all right in the end.

-.-.-

"You know, I like it when you're pregnant." Pein said casually, flipping a page in his book. Konan scowled at him.

"I'm glad someone here does. I sure don't." she replied snappishly, narrowing her eyes.

"See? You're much more expressive when you're pregnant." he pointed out calmly, frowning as he gave up on the novel.

She noted his expression, and carefully asked, "What *were* you reading...? You don't usually make faces like that unless it's absolute trash."

"Some book I confiscated from a chuunin today. I think sensei wrote it; it *is* absolute trash." He tossed it over his shoulder into the trash bin for good measure. "But I still like it when you're pregnant. We should do this again sometime."

Konan sighed, rubbing her temples. "Let's get through the *first* one first. This is bad enough. I don't see why I even decided to keep it. In fact, it was a fool's move. I'll go grab a kunai and—" Pein caught her wrist as she got up, and yanked her back down onto the seat beside him.

"No, if you really wanted to abort that badly, you would have done so beforehand. You'll be *fine*. We've been over this. You're not going to kill an unborn baby; you are going to go through with this pregnancy like a real kunoichi would."

"A real kunoichi wouldn't have let herself gotten pregnant in the first place." she replied diplomatically, resting her hands on her swelled belly. Five months she had already put up with this burden, and very likely tomorrow would put all of that back pain, vomiting, and mood swings to waste. An expecting woman going to war... it was laughable. And yet, Konan was going to do such a thing. At face value, many of the things the Akatsuki had done over the years seemed laughable.

"Hey, shit happens." Pein shrugged, in that annoyingly nonchalant manner that he had adopted recently. "But the fact of the matter is, you're going to keep the baby, and by then we should have all demons and our jutsu ready. The rest of the ninja villages will go out of business, et cetera, et cetera... and then we can behave like normal ninja again."

She snorted, shaking her head in disbelief. "If this kid has the Rinnegan... you expect that to be *normal*? Plus half the organization wants to 'help', as it is, and we're just one big group of psychotic serial killers. This child is going to be the farthest thing from normal."

"Oh, that reminds me..." he said thoughtfully, ignoring the jab at his organization. "About the

Rinnegan."

Konan kept quiet, watching him with a guarded expression. In his opinion, she had never looked more like a mother. Pein just stared back at her with his ringed eyes, waiting it out. He wanted her to ask. But she knew that, so she just kept quiet, and returned his stare warily.

The ginger-haired man sighed, and closed his eyes, giving up on the staring contest. "About the Rinnegan..." he repeated airily, leaning his head back on the couch, "I don't want the kid to have it."

"And what am I supposed to *do* about that, exactly?" she deadpanned, leaning back on his shoulder. Then as an afterthought, "Why?"

"The Sharingan is going to die this generation. So why not a partner to accompany it?"

"You're being moronic." She hit him on the arm for good measure. "Seriously... why?"

"Because it just causes pain. I wouldn't want another child to go through that." Pein whispered seriously, resting his head on top of hers.

"Our child isn't going to grow up in war and pain, though. It will grow up in times of peace and prosperity, thanks to you. ...You're really noble to think that. But I don't see why you have to be the scapegoat for the village..."

"Because our village has been through enough war, and suffering, and loss, and pain. They deserve better. Isn't that why we're doing this, Konan?" He sounded almost unsure. *Almost*.

"Yes... it is. I just can't believe that we're almost finished. Do you think you'll have your jutsu ready by the time the baby is born?" she asked suddenly, almost excitedly. Pein smiled to himself.

"Most likely. Might be a close call, though."

"...Should we hold off until after it's born?" Now she seemed worried. It was hard to keep up with her mood swings, sometimes.

"Why?"

"...Never mind."

He smirked, and just put his arm around her shoulders. "Like I said, I like it when you're pregnant. You act normal."

"And you're acting like an expecting father. You are going to spoil this child rotten, aren't you?" Konan retorted, poking him in his side.

"I don't see why not. He or she deserves to be raised in the ninja equivalent of royalty. Is that going to be a problem?" He raised an eyebrow, challenging her. And with that, the conversation ended. Konan just wrapped her arms around his chest, laughing into his shoulder. He really would have to get used to these mood swings of hers...

--.-

Deidara yawned and stretched languidly, feeling his back pop. So what if he had gotten lazy lately? It didn't hurt to nap. Especially when naps felt *that* good. He definitely wouldn't be getting any sleep anytime soon, so might as well get some when he could. Other than that, he was looking forward to a soldier's life. He missed out on the last war, really, so it was about time he got to see some serious full-scale action...

Then he noticed his hair was braided.

Deidara immediately bristled, turning bright red when he imagined his partner in his room when he was sleeping. Luckily, he spotted a folded note on his desk, and seized it angrily, wondering what the *hell* Sasori had been doing in his room. When he was sleeping. That jerk.

"Deidara-kun, sorry about the hair. I just thought it would look cute on you." he read. It was unmistakably Hinata's handwriting, but handwriting could be copied fairly easily. He still wasn't going to forgive Sasori, even if the redhead was potentially an innocent in this case. *"Neji-kun and I will be at that dango stand that Itachi-sempai likes so much this evening. If you wake up in time, meet us here? Love, Hinata."*

Okay, dango he could do. But, glancing at the clock, he figured out that he still had a few good hours.

Time for sleep again.

Who cares if depressed ninja sleep a lot? I'm not depressed. I just have nothing better to do, he reminded himself, laying back down with a muffled thump and rolling onto his side, facing the wall. He really wasn't depressed. Just more... apathetic. Sasori had almost been his crutch within the organization, and now all of a sudden it was as if he'd been ostracized. Well, okay, he'd only distanced himself because of that stupid kiss, and it wasn't like Sasori looked terribly disturbed by it, but he just didn't know how to react to something like that.

It wasn't like it was his first kiss. It wasn't even his first kiss with another guy (first purposeful kiss, that he'd allow). But Deidara had always been the one to initiate any kind of relationship, and he felt a little blindsided by something like this.

More likely than not, though, he was overanalyzing the entire thing and Sasori had just wanted to mess with him.

If he ever talked to his partner again, Deidara resolved to be more annoying than ever. Just to get revenge.

Of course, a tiny tiny tiny *tiny* (it was *microscopic*, really) part of him admitted to being petty enough to do such a thing just for the attention it gained him. No, it didn't really admit it; it more like just let him know, in a nice, down-to-earth kind of way. *"Yo, Deidara, keep doing this if you like the attention Sasori gives you. 'Kay, thanks, bye. Oh and 'yeah', since you like that word."*

"...Why am I even having this mental conversation?" he asked the far wall. It gave him no reply. Deidara squeezed his eyes shut tight, and pulled the blanket up tighter around his shoulders. Maybe he should have switched partners. Hidan was about the farthest thing from Sasori he could think of. Except that they both liked to mock him and eviscerate random things. But that seemed to be the norm in the organization, at least the latter.

The blonde explosives expert suddenly felt like stabbing a kunai through his skull. Why, *why* was he even *thinking* this crap?! Shinobi weren't supposed to have emotions, and especially not emotions that were connected like this to their own partners. Sure, he had told Hinata that missing-

nin didn't follow such rules, but *still*. Some rules were sacred. Plus he had really only said such things to keep her...

Sasori was different from Hinata in every aspect. Now that he thought of it, it was the quiet girl that was the farthest thing from Sasori he could think of. She was warm, he was cold. She was expressive; he was second only to Itachi in impassiveness. She was beautiful... Sasori was, not beautiful really, but he had this angelic quality around him. Probably the fact that he still looked like a teenager.

Deidara suddenly felt like a pedophile, and buried his face in his pillow in a vain attempt to suffocate himself.

"Okay! I'm going to pretend nothing whatsoever happened between us! This will work." Besides, if he kept ignoring the puppet master, he had a feeling that people would start to ask. And Sasori would probably be more than happy to reply. "...Goddamnit I hate that guy."

The blonde flopped back down onto the bed, knowing that he probably wasn't going to get up again until the leader himself came to fetch him for the war. Hinata and Sasori would just have to fend for themselves. Deidara wanted to keep to himself, and try to keep redheaded devils and white-eyed angels out of his dreams.

-.-.-

"What's this?"

Hinata jumped as guiltily as humanly possible, whirling around to face Neji with an agitated air. "Nothing!" His face told her that he didn't believe her, and she didn't really blame him. Ninja were meant to be paranoid. "I-It's nothing... really."

"Mmhhh. 'Nothing'... is that why you have this?" he asked as he held up the hare mask. She blanched, staring at it, and then shyly looking up into his eyes. Then, thinking better of it, she kept her eyes on the mask.

"It-It's not new. Kabuto-kun gave it to me. Five months ago." She tried her best to copy one of the medic's best disarming smiles, but from his expression, she could tell she didn't do very well. "I swear I didn't just get it. You can ask Kabuto-kun or Deidara-kun. Or even Sasori."

This reassurance by dragging others into it obviously eased his mind somewhat. Deidara wasn't on her side for the first time in their lives, but he wouldn't lie if it didn't matter.

"Just making sure..." he murmured, handing the mask back to her. She set it on the bed casually. "Would you mind giving it back to him, then...?"

Hinata turned that over in her mind. True, if Neji had seen it, then it nullified the disguise, especially since he would be sure to keep an eye out for an ANBU hare mask tomorrow. "Sure... I'll give it to him tomorrow, when I say goodbye. I was only keeping it for the memories..." So what if the memories weren't that good? Her first ANBU mask was a thing to be saved, surely.

She turned back around and continued to pack. She was really packing her backpack for the campaign, but at least now, she had a ready, believable excuse for when he inevitably asked. "...What are you doing?" And there it was.

"Just packing my things." Hinata replied innocently, folding a shirt and setting it in a pile. She would only bring one change of clothes; the rest of it would be weapons and the borrowed ANBU armor (which was hidden safely away, thank the gods).

"For what?" Now he sounded agitated himself. She smiled mentally. Not many people anymore could make him show any kind of emotion aside from annoyance. It was only recently that she'd discovered this power over him, and she was still testing it, really. Or maybe she'd always had this power over him, but she just hadn't noticed...

"I'm moving." she replied simply, and left it at that. Neji waited a long time for her to add to that statement, but of course, she didn't.

Finally, he bit out, "...*What?*"

"Well, someone is going to have to tend to your apartment while you're gone, right? Kisho needs to be fed. And I doubt that anyone would like it if he moved in with me and they found dead rats in their beds upon their return."

He exhaled slowly behind her, and she felt the tension in the room melt away. "Oh. ...Of course." the brunette replied smoothly, as if he had known that all along. It was the best excuse she could come up with, and she had to admit that it was pretty much infallible. (In reality, she had paid the landlord of his apartment to feed Kisho a few times a week, and was relying on the cat's prodigious hunting ability if he was hungry any other time.)

Hinata felt devious, really. It was an odd, foreign feeling, but she had to admit she liked it. But then it just turned to guilt when he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. He really *was* worried about her... Deidara too. But she wouldn't just be left behind. She wasn't the heir anymore; she shouldn't be coddled and protected. "I'm sorry..." she whispered under her breath.

"I forgive you." he replied, just as quietly. She hadn't expected him to hear her, much less answer, and she didn't know if he actually knew what she was apologizing for. Hinata began to doubt herself, but really, she needed some kind of closure with this. She had to go back to the Leaf one last time, even if it was part of the conquering army.

She tossed the pair of pants she was folding onto her bed, running her wrist over her eyes to try to stop from crying. She was lying to her friends, and she was making them worry. Moreover, she was practically physically sick from agonizing about them. She didn't even want to go to war; but it was as if she would be left alone, left behind, again if she didn't. Plus at least this way she could keep them in her line of sight... even if it meant fighting against her old friends.

"I—" she paused to sniff, "I'll say goodbye to you and everyone at the gates tomorrow... But please, j-just leave until then." Because suddenly it was a *very* real possibility that people she knew and loved were going to *die*. Kabuto surely, but one was bad enough! "I'll come see you later with Deidara-kun at the restaurant..."

"No you won't." he replied simply, as if reading her mind. The dark-haired girl just nodded. She had no intention of going out again tonight, and she seriously doubted that Deidara would come out of his room, either. "I'll see you tomorrow, Hinata-sama."

"S-See you..."

As he closed the door, she collapsed onto her bed, too tired to even cry. She just hated all this fighting.

-.-.-

Tsunade folded her hands together in a steeple, glaring out from overtop her fingers. Beside her, both Shizune and Sakura shifted nervously. Kakashi was sprawled out on the couch by the wall, staring out the window. Jiraiya stood in front of the Hokage's desk, one fist on his hip, the other holding a very pathetic looking toad. Tsunade eyed the amphibian warily, wondering why it looked so miserable, and just what her old teammate had done to it. Really, anything to get her mind off of the task at hand.

"So... What are your plans to handle this?" Kakashi drawled, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "If I may be so bold as to ask, Hokage-sama."

"There's not much we can do, really. Mobilize immediately. Prepare for an all-out assault. Evacuate who we can." Tsunade grumbled in response, glancing around the room for any handy bottles of sake. If one had been handy, she'd gulp it down like water. But now was not the time to be going out and fetching some if not. Too bad there wasn't.

"Th-This would explain a bit..." Shizune said softly, scuffling her toes in the carpet. Tsunade turned in her chair to give her a level glare. Shizune looked mildly outraged, replying before she could ask, "If you had been reading the written reports lately, it's been stated that hawks have been disappearing en route to Suna. We've already lost several. And there is no news from Suna, either, Tsunade-sama."

"...Great. Why didn't I know about this sooner?!" the Hokage demanded, letting her head slump until her forehead rested against the desk.

"They were in the written reports! The ones you've been using to practice your handwriting on?" Shizune replied ruefully, the pig in her arms giving a little squeal of agreement. Tsunade had the grace to look properly chastised.

"So Ame has been killing them?"

"It'd make sense. The hawks have to fly over the village itself unless they want to take a southern route. Many of them don't because it's so dry and there's not a lot of forest for prey and roosting spots."

"Send a hawk to Suna immediately, the fastest one we have left. Tell it to take the *southern* route, fast as possible." Tsunade scribbled something down on a piece of paper, and handed it to her aide. "Don't even bother coding it. By now Ame is probably too far gone to care and it'll save time." She made a sign, and the piece of paper suddenly gained the Hokage's seal on the bottom.

"Yes, Hokage-sama!" Shizune ran out of the room almost gratefully.

"So then... war plans?" Jiraiya asked, inspecting the toad he was holding as if it held great interest.

"Guess we'll have to..." she replied, still wondering what was up with the poor thing. "And I'll thank you *not* to bring filthy animals into my office any more, Jiraiya."

"I'll just go leave him with Ibiki, then." he replied nonchalantly.

"...*What*?! Are you saying that's a man?!"

"Well, it was. He's the one I got most of my information from." the Sannin replied proudly, holding the toad up like it was invaluable. "Don't know what else he knows, but I've already gotten plenty."

"Like how the Rain is already mobilized and no one's noticed. And how they plan on marching tomorrow." Kakashi summarized, closing his eyes. "And their aim is Naruto."

"...Yes. They already have eight of the demons..."

"And no one's noticed that, either."

"Enough of this! Let's just make the preparations needed! There's no time to be wasted, and we can figure out what the hell we were doing during all of this *later*. Sakura, go alert the hospital that we're now in a war. Keep minimal staff working there; the rest of the medics are under *your* command."

The pinkette girl looked ready to faint. "Wh-What? Why... mine?"

"Because Shizune and I are going to be busy, and you are a very capable medic. Plus I want you in a position of power for this but out of the direct combat." Tsunade replied succinctly. Kakashi eyed his student with a mixture of amusement and agreement.

Sakura colored, and hastily bowed. "Y-Yes! I'll do my best!" She left them as well, which left only three of them.

The Hokage, if possible, became even more serious. "Hatake..."

"I understand. You want me to guard Naruto during all of this. Will do." he replied, lolling his head back on the couch's back.

"No." His head shot up, and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously. The blonde woman sighed, and shook her head. "I need you in the fighting. You are one of my strongest jounin, probably at Akatsuki level... and I need you out there, fighting said Akatsuki. Naruto is going to be out of the fighting altogether, locked and sealed in this room with the only squad of ANBU that isn't going to be joining the fray."

"He's not going to stand for that..." Jiraiya warned idly, rolling his eyes.

"I know. And I would knock him out and stuff him in a closet somewhere... but he has to be awake. If the Akatsuki do get to the point where they are seizing the tower, I want him to go Kyuubi on their asses. We can only hold back so many of the Akatsuki members for so long, so he's going to have to take care of the rest if worst comes to worst." No one spoke for a long time. Then, finally, Tsunade sighed and added, "Hatake, go out and start to evacuate the civilians and children. Genin... are allowed to stay only if they have permission from their teachers. Otherwise, I want this village to be on lock-down."

"Will do." The white-haired man vanished without another sound.

The two Sannin just stared at each other for a long, long time.

"...We've seen too many wars." Jiraiya said presently, shifting the toad to his other arm.

Tsunade nodded wearily. "I have a feeling that we're not going to see too many more, either... I'm going to have to ask you to take on one of the Akatsuki members directly, Jiraiya."

"I was going to anyway. I heard some interesting things about the leader... and I think I have an

old score to settle with him."

She narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Are you saying that you're withholding information from me...?"

"Possibly. It could just be a rumor, though." Then, he brightened. Which, in itself, was scary enough. "Speaking of rumors, I heard another very interesting one. About the leader's partner. Let's just say that she won't be fighting in this battle." His eyes glittered deviously, and Tsunade had a very bad feeling about this whole thing.

"Get out of here. Go make yourself useful, and drop that thing off with Ibiki. Brief him on the situation. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll capture a member. He'd have a heyday with that." She smirked, but her heart wasn't in it. Jiraiya just nodded, and looked very sad for a brief moment. But then even that vanished, and he beamed at her.

"Let's show these brats what shinobi are really like."

-.-.-

Shadows stood in a darkened space. Everything was black, it seemed. Then, a voice spoke up. "One more..."

"One more is all?" a different voice asked.

"Yes, my brother. One more."

"The Kyuubi." Yet another voice joined in.

"Yes. He's been in some child for the past sixteen years. We haven't seen the likes of him since that fool Madara decided to send him off to Konohagakure."

A snicker. "And that plan failed miserably, didn't it?" This time, it was a more feminine voice. It didn't sound any less terrifying, however.

"It's irrelevant. No one had any idea that the Yondaime Hokage had that kind of sealing ability." the first voice snapped irritably.

"But soon even the great Kyuubi will be sealed, too."

"Yes. And then that fool will try to create a jutsu of it."

Laughter all among the group. There wasn't any humor in it. In fact, it sounded more like amused growling and snarling.

"We'll see how far he gets with *that*."

"Oh, yes. We shall. I just can't wait to see the look on his face when he realizes how his precious jutsu will *really* go..."

"But... isn't it saying something that he's managed to orchestrate all of this already? Eight Bijuu sealed, the ninth almost captured. And the prison..."

"Preposterous!"

"There's no way that a mere mortal could *really* harness the power of the Bijuu."

"Let alone all nine of them!"

"He has Madara with him." Another new voice joined in. This one was deeper than the others were, and sounded much calmer, but there was an undercurrent of danger in the voice. A hush fell over the group.

"Uchiha Madara... He could control the *Kyuubi*, couldn't he...?" the feminine voice breathed, almost in awe.

"To some degree. But the Kyuubi has just been festering in his anger and Madara has weakened greatly in power."

"Isn't there *another* Uchiha, though? I've heard that he's almost up to Madara's standard."

"Hardly." A roll of the eyes. "The Akatsuki is just a group of strong *shinobi*. They think they're strong because they're playing with the Bijuu is all."

"Hmm. I guess we'll just see. Ten Akatsuki or nine Bijuu." More raucous laughter. "I can't wait to see how it turns out..."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Farewells are spoken, and morale is high during the march to Konoha's gates. Sasuke and his team make their return, but even the Akatsuki leader can't interfere in his quest for revenge for long. The rest of the Akatsuki have a blast while on the way, between the bickering, of course. And war is finally and formally declared...

March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Goodbye...!"

That seemed to be the catchphrase of the day. There was shouting, screaming, sobbing and a lot of hugging and kissing going on, too, but Hinata didn't think that she heard a single person who didn't say 'goodbye'.

She spied the couple from the shop, kissing passionately, with the woman crying. She looked away, reddening, wondering how they could do something like that in broad daylight, in the middle of a crowd. She thought it was bad enough that she was holding hands with Neji. Well, okay, truthfully that was because he was half-dragging her through the crowd towards the gates, but still.

"Goodbye, darling. Come back safe."

"Noooo, mama, don' go!"

"Say goodbye, sweetie."

"Don' wanna! Mama's gonna get hurt!"

Hinata twisted around in his grasp to continue watching the saddening scene. A little girl with pigtails was being restrained by her father as her mother walked away, looking like she was trying hard not to cry herself. The little girl burst into tears, screaming and tugging at the hands that held her back.

Near the little girl, three genin were looking quite uncomfortable as their sensei bid them farewell. Genin weren't allowed on this campaign, and were basically told to stay behind in the village and protect the villagers if something should happen. Generally the kids were overjoyed with this newfound responsibility, but now it just seemed sobering. The two boys on the team were openly glaring mutinously at the jounin, whereas the kunoichi just latched onto his waist and was refusing to let go.

So many couples, teams, families were being broken up over this war. Hinata didn't like it. She resolutely kept her eyes forward from then on, to prevent her from crying at all the heartbreak going on around her. How many of these people would never return to those who were waiting for them?

Neji stopped so suddenly that she ran into his back. He half-turned around to look at her with surprise, and she ducked her head and stared at her sandals. He was very handsome in his ANBU gear and with his hair tied back in a ponytail. Should she be openly sobbing at his departure like a lot of the other people around her? True, it'd only be an act, but she felt kind of uncomfortable with all of the crying and sadness around her when she was comfortable in her little lie.

She was about to ask why he had stopped, when something blonde and very solid collided with her. Deidara wrapped his arms around her to stop her from falling, but she still felt a little unbalanced as he clung to her and started shouting. "Oh my god, Bya-chan, I'm going to miss you so much, yeah! I promise I'll be back soon and I won't die or anything and you just behave while we're gone! Don't get into any trouble, yeah! I'm going to miss you so much! Are you going to miss me, yeah?"

"O-Of course!" She embraced him back, and she felt him lift her off her feet and give her a little twirl. She laughed at him, and noticed out of the corner of her eye that Neji was patiently waiting for them to get done, though his arms were crossed and he was tapping his foot. That in itself was a form of acceptance of whatever relationship she and Deidara had. Which was, of course, great.

"We're almost done, we're almost done! And then we can relax and retire early 'cause the Akatsuki will totally kick ass and we'll be all really rich and no one can oppose us enough to be of any threat, yeah." he continued gleefully, setting her back down. He seemed quite excited for this war.

"Right!" Hinata chirped in reply, grinning back at him.

"Well good-bye, then." Suddenly, the Iwa-nin became somber again, and straightened up. He had grown since they first met, and Hinata had to tilt back her head a bit to look up at him. "I'm serious, though... I'll miss you."

Right, it was their first time apart since they met. At least apart for any length of time. It first hit Hinata that she had no idea how long this campaign was supposed to go on for. She knew that the leader had wanted this to be quick, before either Suna or Kiri could mobilize and come to Konoha's rescue. (Because Akatsuki or not, a hundred and fifty ninja versus three villages was hardly fair.) But it was obvious that no one really knew how long this war was supposed to last.

"Goodbye... good luck. Come back safe." She gave him an extra hug and a peck on the cheek, which did nothing to faze either of them but Neji looked pointedly away. "Where's the rest of the Akatsuki? I'd like to, um, say goodbye to everyone..."

"Ehh, I don't know exactly, yeah. They're pretty spread out right now. Sasori-danna is over that way, with Kabuto, and then I know Leader-sama and Konan are over near the gates trying to fend off admirers. Oh! You should see Itachi, yeah. Half the female population is trying to kiss him goodbye." Deidara snickered evilly, and she presumed that he probably had a hand in pointing out where the eldest Uchiha was to all of the would-be fan girls.

"Hmm, I need to say goodbye to Kabuto-kun. I have to, um... return his mask." She held the hare mask out sheepishly, and he looked at it for a moment before he recognized it.

"Oh! You still have that? Why don't you keep it, yeah?"

"I'd still like to say goodbye to him, Deidara-kun." she pointed out matter-of-factly.

-.-.-

Sasori was efficiently ignoring all of what Kabuto was saying. Plus, even if he *had* cared, it wouldn't be like he could understand most of it. It seemed to just be a long string of hissed insults and threats at this point. Or so he assumed. Again, he really wasn't paying attention.

"—and I swear that if you touch a single hair on his head during all of this—oh, Hinata-chan. And... Deidara." Kabuto perked up immediately with a smile that was so bright it was a wonder that they all didn't go blind. Maybe he was slipping up in his anger or panic, or maybe Kabuto was just getting worse with his facial expressions.

Regardless, what he said caught Sasori's attention at last. His head snapped around to see three—not two—characters approaching at a lazy pace. Deidara and the two Hyuuga. He forced himself to

nod politely in Neji and Hinata's direction, and merely stared as his partner stared back. He sure as hell wasn't avoiding him now. In fact, he seemed to be challenging Sasori. Openly defiant. Defiant of what, he didn't know, but Sasori knew how to take on a challenge.

Kabuto coughed, breaking up the tense staring contest. Hinata, who had been looking back and forth between them, no doubt wondering *what* was going on *this* time, cleared her throat as well. "U-Um... I just wanted to say bye to, um... both of you I guess..."

She hugged Kabuto, and then as an afterthought, stuck out her hand for a handshake with Sasori. He wasn't objecting. He was, however, half-tempted to pull her into an embrace just to see the others' reactions. The Suna-nin decided against it and just nodded again as he shook her hand. "Goodbye." So what if it was a lie. Poor girl probably didn't even know he knew about her little 'plan'.

Then, after a brief internal debate, Sasori pulled Hinata into a hug. She stiffened, but then he used the movement to whisper, "Try to work up a few tears. Deidara is getting suspicious." The dark-haired kunoichi just blinked at him, not daring to nod.

"I-I'll miss you... all of you, even you, Sasori-san." she said dutifully, letting her voice break. It was sudden, but it worked. Deidara visibly relaxed when she hugged him again, though Neji was glaring murderously at Sasori. "Just come back... come back safe and alive, o-okay?" She was a better actor than he had pegged her for.

Sasori watched as a pair of the rowdier ninja passed by, openly staring at Hinata hanging off of Deidara. One of them gave a low whistle, giving the pair a thumbs-up when they turned to look. The Hyuuga girl went bright red, but Deidara had a better response. He stuck out his butt and pushed out the chest he didn't have, winked at them, and replied in a very masculine voice, "See you on the battlefield, boys."

The two men hastily avoided eye contact and fled. Deidara laughed at their expense, but Kabuto just took the opportunity to lean in and ask shrewdly, "Are you *sure* you're not gay?"

Neji and Sasori hastily separated the two.

And then Pein called attention to the mass of men and women, Konan, Midori and Daisuke all beside him. In short, the march had begun to Konohagakure.

-.-.-

Unfortunately, the day it started was incredibly warm. It had to be at least eighty or eighty five, plus a very warm rain. Plus, as they made it to the border around midday, many of the ninja just stopped in their squads and stared. The rain cut off abruptly at the border, and the clouds overhead melted away into a bright blue sky and an even brighter sun. Many of them blinked in adjustment to the sudden light. Living for months in a perpetually overcast city can do that to your vision.

Luckily for the morale of the soldiers, the Akatsuki were in front (aside from the scouts) and in full view. Everyone had been ordered to be on foot until now, and as the ginger-haired man crossed the border from his country, all of the rain overhead stopped. The temperature shot up as the ninja looked around in surprise.

That was nothing compared to their amazement when the leader summoned a giant three-headed

dog. Even several Akatsuki members who hadn't seen this trick before backed up nervously as the massive canine snarled at them. Pein just helped Konan up onto its back, seating himself behind her. "Faster travel permitted! Double-time!" he barked, pointing into the Konoha forest. "We'll be there in a day if we hurry!"

This raised a massive cheer among most of them, and all sorts of summons appeared in a sudden mass of nin-smoke. Zetsu vanished into the ground, reappearing in the side of a tree just up the path with a grin. Deidara sagged in relief as he created a large bird to ride on, and his partner looked nearly as thankful as him as the puppeteer summoned Hiruko and eagerly disappeared within it. Hidan stuck his tongue out at them both, and started swearing at the top of his lungs when, during takeoff, the clay bird's wing clipped his head and accidentally snapped his neck.

Kakuzu just laughingly healed it—being Hidan's partner allowed him an amazing range of knowledge of medical jutsu—and clapped him on the back.

Most of the older ninja were either wary or downright giddy with this new war. The veterans were mostly silent among themselves, save for Kakuzu, really. But then again, half the organization was practically jumping for joy; mass murderers do love bloodlust, of course. Zetsu and Kisame both had already started to complain about hurrying it up, so they could start fighting.

Nothing else happened for quite some time. The temperature steadily rose as they traveled deeper into Fire territory. It had to be at least a hundred now, without a cloud in the sky. Nearly everyone was sweating buckets, and even the large dog summon was panting with all three mouths. It got to be kind of a game to see who could make the coldest water jutsu. Chuunin and jounin were splashing each other with water from nearby rivers they passed, or even with the small amounts located in water bottles or sweat. It pretty much ended when Kisame turned around and flooded half the forest with a *very* large water jutsu, and Kakuzu decided to freeze it.

"Grow up, will you two!" Pein snapped, getting thrown off as his dog skittered around on the ice. Of course, the Ame ninja behind him were having fun skating along. Konan merely watched placidly as he picked himself off, punched the nearest of the two—Kisame—in the shoulder, and jumped back up onto his summon.

Soon enough, however, they ran out of ice to play on and continued along in a sullen silence. Pein had his Akatsuki members spread out through the small army, checking in with the squadrons to see how they were faring. Deidara and Zetsu were nowhere to be seen, long gone on self-appointed scouting trips.

The group came to an abrupt halt, however, just as the sun was beginning to set over the far range of mountains. Pein and Konan stared listlessly down at the four shinobi who dared block their path, but so many more heads were peeking out of branches just to see *who* it was that dared to stop the Akatsuki.

No one dared offer an introduction, to those who recognized the team. Konan appeared completely clueless, whereas the man behind her had the expression of someone who was trying to place a long-forgotten face.

Ignoring the murderous intent flooding the forest path, it was Kisame who first spoke up. "...Man, Suigetsu, I haven't seen you since you were waist-high and still training under Zabuza. I see you have his sword, too. How have you been?"

"Oh, I've been great, Kisame-senpai." the pale-haired shinobi chirped in reply, taking a long sip on his water bottle afterward. "I see you've been having lots of fun without the Seven, too."

"Definitely."

As the two Kiri-nin chatted casually, people became uncomfortably aware of the glaring contest going on between Itachi and this mysterious black-haired kid who bore a striking resemblance to him. Many of them had never seen the latter before, but it was obvious that he was an Uchiha as well. Most of the female population present were blushing madly, staring with wide eyes and mouth agape.

Then, smoothly cutting through the two Kiri-nin's conversation, Itachi said one simple word. "Sasuke."

"Itachi... today is the day you die."

-.-.-

"Oh my god—you guys have to come see this!" Someone ran back into the group where the medics were resting. Kabuto looked up with a bored expression. He had thought that they'd stopped for an actual *rest*, not because of some other distraction. He noticed Hinata carefully pry back the feline mask he'd loaned her—because she had explained that Neji had saw the hare one, and that she had to switch, even though Kabuto was fairly certain that Neji knew anyway—and glance at him with a curiosity glowing in her white eyes.

"Nah, I'm gonna sit here and rest." One of the other kunoichi had early on identified herself as the complaining type. She was sprawled out on her back in the shade of a large tree, looking perfectly content.

Kabuto, however, was a bit more inquisitive than that. He got up, dusting off his pants, and sauntered over towards the large mass just down the group. The medics had been put in back, aside from a rear guard, and he wasn't exactly complaining about it. At least it was quiet away from those damn Akatsuki.

Surprisingly, he heard Sasori's voice first. That alone really hooked him as he muscled his way through the crowd. "...Karin, I hadn't known that you were wandering around with such company these days."

Karin! She had been one of Orochimaru's most loyal subordinates. Kabuto forcefully pushed someone out of the way, kicking aside another, before he broke out into the cleared space. Sure enough, the red-haired woman stood there defiantly, hands on her hips. He had thought that she'd gone off on her own after Orochimaru died... But Kabuto couldn't hold back a snort of laughter when she saw *what* company she was in.

Suigetsu he knew was out there, and he knew he had been traveling with Sasuke. Those two juxtaposed against each other was funny enough, but throw in *Karin* of all the kunoichi in the world... Most of the laughter died in his throat, however, when he saw the hulking man behind the three of them. Juugo.

Uh-oh.

The man's orange eyes alighted on him at once. It had been Orochimaru personally who first started experimenting with Juugo's unique ability, but it had been Kabuto who took over after the initial isolation of the 'cursed' genes. It hadn't been a pleasant experience for Juugo, to say the least.

Kabuto just had time to offer an uncertain smile before the black markings took over. Sasuke reacted too late to stop him, and Suigetsu and Karin just barely managed to dive out of the way to duck under the axe his forearm turned into. Kabuto already had his precious chakra covering his palms in his *Shosen* jutsu, and punched forward with one arm, intending to cut the tendons in Juugo's arm. He'd cut the whole arm off if need be.

Unfortunately, someone caught his wrist, and another someone stepped in front of Juugo. The crazed man stared at him for a long while, and then kind of slumped and fell backward into a heap. Tobi cheerfully broke Kabuto's wrist for good measure, telling him quietly, "I wouldn't go starting fights right now if I were *you*."

Kabuto just cradled his wrist, hissing as he realized not only did he waste a lot of chakra on a jutsu that was blocked, but now he'd have to mend broken bones as well. As if he didn't have enough problems with chakra depletion.

"Itachi—your fight isn't with Juugo!" Sasuke snarled, motioning for Suigetsu to go fetch the fallen man. Due to Tobi's height, Kabuto hadn't seen who had so effortlessly stopped the giant.

"I was stopping him from harming one of my allies. He's only unconscious." Itachi replied dispassionately. "Sasuke, I will fight you later. After we have sealed the Kyuubi, I—"

"No. We are going to fight *now*. I've already waited too long for this."

While the brothers were having their argument, Tobi not-so-gently herded Kabuto and a few of the other stragglers back into the army's general mass. Kabuto shot him a dirty look, but the masked ninja didn't notice, and instead turned back to watch the fight. The silver-haired medic dodged back out of the crowd, slinking over towards where Sasori was comfortably swishing Hiruko's tail.

"What'd he do to you?" he asked gruffly, eyeing Kabuto's arm.

"Broke my wrist. More of an annoyance than anything..."

"Then get the Hyuuga girl to heal it. No need to waste your *own* chakra."

"I think I'll do just that." He dropped his arm to the side, knowing he'd regret the swelling later, but not wanting to appear like he was sulking. Which he technically was, but when Kabuto sulked, he didn't like others to notice. "Why are they here?"

"Apparently the little Uchiha has gathered that crackpot team together during the time he's last been spotted."

"Not quite..." he corrected under his breath, watching in amusement as Karin's predatory gaze kept darting back and forth between Sasuke and Itachi. "And he's decided *now* of all times to attack?"

"I think he just did it for the attention. There's no way he'd actually want to hold a grudge match in Leaf territory. He just wants to give Itachi the message."

Kabuto thought that Sasori was overestimating Sasuke's patience, but kept his thoughts to himself. From what he knew of Sasuke, he would love to hold his grudge match in Leaf territory, just so he could haul back Itachi's head as a trophy to all those in the village with a big 'I told you so'. His hand was starting to feel a bit heavy from the blood swelling in it, but he just gave it a small shake and ignored the sensation. "I hadn't known that you knew Karin."

"I've only met her once before, when she was a lot younger. Orochimaru was quite proud of her chakra sensing ability, I think it was." Sasori replied idly, coiling Hiruko's tail on the ground. It was

a habit of his he did when he was bored. Uncoiling the metal links, he added, "Either way, I really doubt that Leader-sama is going to stand for this nonsense much longer. He's already summoned another body..."

Kabuto hadn't noticed that little detail. Glancing over towards the large dog, the more familiar spiky-haired Pein was standing by its paw, watching the escalating argument. Up on the dog's back, behind Konan, the one he had recently adopted in public was still sitting. Kabuto only knew a few sparse details about Pein's bodies, and that precious little bit of information had been gathered through careful observation and Orochimaru's defiant streaks. He had more than four bodies, at least, only two of which he had seen personally. Each one had different abilities, too, though that was as far as his information took him. Maybe he'd get a chance now to add some first-hand experience.

Even if he was dying, damn it, he liked to know things like this.

Sasuke suddenly pulled a *Chidori* out of thin air, and charged his older brother. Itachi just turned on the Mangekyou, but Pein chose that moment to intervene. Kabuto only saw the movement because he had been looking for it.

He just looked like he took a step forward, and all of a sudden he was *between* the two. Closer to Itachi, or at least close enough to cover his eyes with his hand, forcing the Konoha missing-nin's head back. He teetered there for a brief moment, before he balanced himself out by taking a step backward. Sasuke's fist he caught with his own, dispelling the electricity with an almost magical quality.

"That was unnecessary." Itachi stated simply, completely unmoving. Sasuke, however, was trying to get out of Pein's grasp, but was only succeeding in breaking his own fingers.

"You two are going to break this up. Itachi, you are not going to provoke your baby brother with your useless words. Sasuke, you are not going to attack *my* Akatsuki at a time like this. You can have your match with your brother later, after the sealing is complete." Sasuke finally wrenched his arm away from the leader, looking with a mix of contempt and triumph as he caught sight of the burns on his palm. Pein ignored him, and instead held up four fingers in front of the younger Uchiha's face. "Four months. By then we will be done with our plans, and I will no longer impede your fight with Itachi."

"Why should I—"

"Because I am *bigger* than you, and I have an entire army standing behind me. You have three mediocre shinobi and an unconscious giant." Pein snarled. "...Now. Get out of the way."

Pride severely wounded, Sasuke really didn't have any chance than to retreat. Karin eagerly darted up to lead him away and tend to his minor injuries, whispering condolences and plans for revenge into his ear. Suigetsu—who had continued his conversation with Kisame all throughout this—bade a cheerful goodbye to Kisame, hefted Juugo over his shoulder, and departed as well.

"...Sasuke is going to be *very* angry in four months." Kabuto remarked, melting back into the crowd as they continued onward. Sasori fell into step alongside him—as well as he could, anyway, inside of Hiruko.

"If he's as smart as he pretends to be, he'll use this time to train." Sasori replied dryly. "He already seemed to be on par with Itachi, if his ego was anything to go by. Four months could make life interesting."

Of course. Sasuke could go off and develop a new jutsu or weapon or something, whereas Itachi was tied up with this war and then the eventual sealing. He wouldn't be developing any counter-strategies anytime soon. Kabuto craned his neck to see where Itachi had run off to. He was shorter than a lot of the other shinobi, so he vanished quite efficiently.

Kabuto would have liked to see how he was taking this. Plus he had been nothing short of humiliated in front of half the militia by his own leader. No doubt mutiny was on his mind. The medic smirked to himself, pushing his glasses up further on his nose. He could only hope that something as interesting as mutiny in the Akatsuki would happen.

Soon enough, Sasori had managed to walk him all the way back to the sparse group of medics under his command. He was annoyed by this, though much of his ill will disappeared when his second-in-command—some guy named Renji—jumped up and immediately healed his broken wrist.

-.-.-

A lot of talking went on during the march. Most of it that night. Due to a majority vote, the Ame forces had decided to continue traveling through the night, especially after a team of Konoha scouts had been caught and mutilated by Zetsu. Those lucky enough to have summons (or jutsus) to ride on slept sporadically, but mostly people stayed up to talk.

"I sure hope I get to go back and see my girl again."

"D'you think that we'll get to see the Sannin fight?"

"I heard that Pein-sama already killed one of the Sannin."

This last remark, of course, immediately set Deidara off. "*What the fuck! I was the one who killed Orochimaru, yeah!*" The unfortunate ninja who had said that looked like he had just suffered a mild heart attack. "Stupid ignorant civilians..."

"That wasn't a civilian, it was a jounin from Iwa." Sasori replied with a stretch that made his artificial joints crack. "A lot of ninja from the west and far east who just recently went rogue barely have a clue at who the Sannin are, let alone who killed one of them."

"An Iwa-nin? I'm going to go snap his stupid little neck, yeah..."

"Why are you so worked up, anyway?" The redhead draped himself over Hiruko, watching his partner with one open eye. His puppet's tail curled overtop of his chest like some sort of bizarre blanket.

"Are you going to sleep, yeah?" Deidara asked skeptically instead of replying.

"Of course not. Can't someone get comfortable once in awhile? But why were you so worked up? All you did was kill Orochimaru because we *picked* you to." Sasori wouldn't let the matter drop. Deidara, perhaps for the first time, really *noticed* that it had been Sasori who had been Orochimaru's partner previously. Did they bicker all the time? Did Sasori stoop to using such perverse methods to teach his partner a lesson? Or had he learned it from Orochimaru? How long had they worked together before he came into the picture?

"Hey, it's annoying, yeah... It took a hell of a lot of work to kill him." he grumbled, crossing his arms with a pout. "Sasori-danna... what was it like when Orochimaru was still in the organization, yeah?"

"A lot quieter." A long pause, in which Deidara absolutely refused to answer. "A lot darker."

"Darker, yeah?" This piqued his curiosity at last.

"We didn't have a dumb blonde pyromaniac or his little Hyuuga pet to cheer us up. Orochimaru was bloodthirsty, ruthless and cruel. He liked to... experiment."

"I can be bloodthirsty..." Deidara muttered sullenly. Why did he feel like comparing himself to Sasori's old partner? "So it was quieter and darker. That may be because you guys were still living in caves before the Rain fell, yeah."

"Witty." Sasori replied listlessly, closing both his eyes. The blonde watched him, until he accidentally tripped over a root and went sprawling. Hiruko's tail was the only thing that prevented him from getting a mouthful of dirt, though Deidara wasn't happy for it. (He had been confined to the ground after sunset, since the leader wanted them all within his sight during the night. And this wasn't the first time he'd tripped over something, either.) "Oh, and graceful, too. What a catch. I bet you make kunoichi swoon right and left, Deidara." The puppeteer hadn't batted an eye.

With an embarrassed growl, he shoved the metal tail away from him, dusting himself off. Instead, he let out a surprised squawk as the appendage wrapped itself around his waist and picked him up. It set him back down on Hiruko's back, right behind Sasori, to which the redhead just sat up, rubbed at his eyes, and leaned back to look at him upside-down. "...What?" Deidara growled, narrowing his eyes.

"This way you won't trip again." he said, and then straightened back up, staring out ahead and letting Deidara send his death glares at the back of his head.

Deciding to fight fire with fire, he just faked a yawn. A few minutes later, he faked another, and thirty seconds after that, he not-so-faked another. Deidara allowed his head to drop, and fall back slightly, testing the waters. Hiruko's tail caught him, and he pretended to jerk back awake at its touch. A few moments later, he allowed his body to slump forward against Sasori's back. The redhead stiffened at the sudden contact, but then slowly relaxed as Deidara allowed himself a wicked grin. So *that's* how it was.

Unfortunately, he was human and Sasori was not.

Before he knew it, when the night was at its darkest, Deidara finally drifted off to sleep, wrapping his arms around Sasori for what his mind believed was warmth.

-.-.-

"Need I ask?"

"D-Deidara-kun?"

"Hinata's wearing *your* cat mask, then. I was wondering how she got in past Neji." Sasori replied coolly. He seemed completely unperturbed by the fact that Deidara was snoring against his back,

his face hidden in his red hair and arms wrapped loosely around his stomach. They were both riding on Hiruko like some sort of convoluted horse. "That's *your* cat mask, Kabuto."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that." The silver-haired spy gestured to the hare mask atop of his head. "We're going to trade back when we get back to Ame."

"Why even trade back, then?" Sasori asked indifferently, returning his flat gaze to the darkened forest path ahead of them.

"Because I rather liked that mask. And Hinata-chan already has her own cat."

Sasori glanced back at her with a sharpness that surprised her. "You still have that cat?" he asked in a low voice. Kabuto looked back and forth between them, obviously more curious than alarmed at his master's sudden interest in her pet.

"Y-Yes... he's staying in Neji's apartment; I-I'm paying the landlord to feed him while I'm gone..." Hinata, however, was plainly disturbed by this.

"...I'd get rid of the thing, if I were you. Itachi's the one who gave it to you, wasn't he?"

"Um, yes..."

"Get rid of it."

She shook her head a bit stubbornly. "No. Kisho is my pet, an-and it was very kind of Itachi-senpai to give him to me. It's rude to return gifts." Sasori mumbled some retort under his breath, but let the matter of the feline drop.

"...And I still can't begin to imagine how you managed to coerce Deidara to speak to you again, much less use your head as a pillow." Kabuto said conversationally, smiling brightly at Sasori.

"Go bother someone else with your idiocy."

"Um, does this mean that you two have reconciled?" Hinata asked hopefully, also hoping to stave off the coming fight. "I don't know what fight you two had this time, but I'm really glad that you are on speaking terms again." Then, she dropped her voice to a lower tone, and added, "Because it's too easy to hate you and do things like sabotaging your poison collection when you and Deidara-kun are still fighting."

"Hn, whatev—*what?*"

"I'm kidding." She laughed lightly at him, but she allowed him the fact that there was very little humor in it. Even if she had had the opportunity and the motive, she wouldn't do something so petty, or dangerous. She didn't hate Sasori *that* much. Hinata just really didn't like it when they fought so often. Maybe his own paranoia would stop him from picking arguments with his partner, if only for the safety of his weapon of choice.

Deidara mumbled something in his sleep, and Hinata jumped slightly. "Jumpy, aren't we?" Sasori asked with a tight smile. "If you're so worried about him spotting you, why did you come seek him out in the first place?"

"I didn't..." She ducked her head, looking away. "Kabuto-kun wanted to come speak with you."

Kabuto didn't appear pleased at the fault being dumped on him. "I merely suggested we take a walk and see if we could find a suitable conversation to join..."

Then he perked up and turned his head backward, as if just spotting something with his eyes. Just a millisecond later, Sasori mimicked the movement as best he could, considering he still had a sleeping blonde attached to his back. Hinata, ever the good ninja, unconsciously followed their eyes, turning back to see what had caught their attention—and ran into someone.

She realized instantly that the pair had both done it on purpose, just so she could run into whoever this was. Flushing in embarrassment, she rubbed her sore backside from where she fell, blinking in surprise when a hand was extended down to help her back up. Hinata followed the hand up the arm, to the shoulder, where some very familiar brown hair had fallen... and then she could have died of embarrassment.

Neji just stood silently, still holding out his hand, but not looking very pleased.

"U-Um... N-Neji, hi..."

"You might want to get up to your feet before you start begging for your life and trust back, Hinata-chan. Unless you want to skip right to the groveling bit." Kabuto advised, smirking. As an afterthought, he took the hare mask off from the top of his head, and plucked his original cat mask off of hers, tossing the rabbit mask in her lap. "Now I can have my cat one back..."

Hinata ignored her cousin's hand, getting up on her own and dusting herself off. "... You don't seem very surprised, niisan."

"I'm not," he admitted tersely, crossing his arms. He not-so-gently took her arm and steered her off in another direction, away from Sasori and Kabuto. She couldn't take this as a good development.

When he didn't speak again, and when they were a suitable distance from most of the other ninja, Hinata plucked up the courage to finally ask, "Wh-Who told you?"

"A little birdie. Apparently she hadn't known it was a secret."

...*Midori...* *I swear I'll get you for this*, she vowed, knowing that it was the furthest thing from an accident that the green-eyed girl had used to tell him of her sneaking along. Neji didn't say anything else, but she couldn't bring herself to even apologize. And if he really wasn't surprised, then she should have known that he had really known all along. Maybe her excuses hadn't been as infallible as she'd thought...

Still, the silence continued. They just continued walking in the night. Hinata couldn't tell if he was angry, or disappointed, or what. She didn't even know how she was supposed to react. She'd known all along, of course, that this couldn't stay a secret, but she hadn't counted on the fact that he'd find out this early on in the march.

"You are going to stay with the other medics. I want you to stick to Kabuto like glue." he informed her in a clipped voice. Her heart sank. So he *was* angry.

"I... I was planning on doing that... anyway..." she whispered in poor defense.

"You are going to stay out of the fighting at all costs."

"Y-Yes..."

"Even if you get called in as a medic, I want you out of the direct fighting. Just... follow Kabuto." And then she realized that Neji really wasn't angry. He was worried. He just covered that with a thin veil of anger, as he tended to do. Hinata smiled to herself in relief, twiddling her fingers inside her sleeves. This put a new, more pleasant, spin on the chewing out she was about to receive.

"I will." She honestly couldn't tell if this would become a lie or not. She had no idea what full-scale shinobi battle was like, or what would happen once it started. In fact, the world had no idea what full-scale shinobi battle was like. Normally ninja wars were dependent on guerilla warfare, with little to no actual *battles*. Pein knew he was making history by leading the first actual *army* of ninja, but most of the younger ninja under his command had no notion of this.

"And this was a very *stupid* move, Hinata-sama. War is bad enough having to worry that you're going to get killed..." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. It only served to muss up his ponytail, and Hinata reflexively leaned up and smoothed it out for him. Her protector locked gazes with her, looking like she had dealt him a fatal blow with that innocuous move. "Be careful. That's all I really want you to do. Don't be a hero and don't run off to 'save' someone."

"I... umm, I'll be careful." She didn't know how to react to the last sentence. She hadn't ever pictured herself 'running off to save someone', but when she thought about it, she knew she would if the situation arose. But Hinata could at least promise to be careful. "You, too. Please be careful, Neji-niisan."

"I'll fare well enough, I think." he replied dryly. "I'm more worried about you."

Hinata didn't mention that she was thinking the exact same thing.

-.-.-

As dawn broke over the Hokage Mountain, the massive dog sat obediently at the end of the forest, before the Konoha gates. Pein slid off of its back, patting its forearm before walking up to the gateway. Tsunade and Jiraiya stood side-by-side, the only thing that appeared to be blocking their path forward. The leader of the Akatsuki strode towards them, until he left a good thirty or so yards between them. "...Give us the Kyuubi." His voice was completely devoid of emotion or inflection. Just a cold, businesslike tone of demand.

"No." Tsunade replied, openly defiant. She just uncrossed her arms from in front of her large chest, tilting her head to one side. The Hokage stared him down, but he just stared coolly back with his trademark ringed eyes.

"...Then, as the leader of the Akatsuki, I formally declare war on Konohagakure and any and all of its allies."

"As the Hokage, leader of Konohagakure, I formally return your declaration of war on your own country and any allies you may have."

The formalities were now all out of the way, and both countries entered an official state of war. Now all that was left was on whom the first attack would land.

The Akatsuki, behind him and still near his dog summon, fanned out slightly in their pairs, readying various weapons and jutsus. A flutter of papers, though there was no wind, and Konan was airborne on a pair of large angelic wings, fashioned entirely from her medium of choice. She hovered above them, under direct orders not to get into any of the fighting, due to her 'condition'.

Hidan slung his scythe off of his shoulder. His partner, beside him, rolled his shoulders back and slowly started forming seals.

Kisame pulled Samehada out of the leather strap on his back, resting it on the ground in a relaxed pose. Itachi brushed some hair out of his eyes, which were suddenly very red.

Zetsu stepped smoothly out of the tree nearest his partner, both halves of his face grinning broadly. Tobi shrugged cheerfully, scuffling his sandals in the dirt with a kind of sadistic enthusiasm that was poorly masked.

Deidara and Sasori just glanced at each other. Then the redhead disappeared inside of Hiruko once more, coiling its tail, the tip glistening with enough poison to kill a bull elephant. Deidara pulled out of his pockets all sorts of art he'd created on the way, everything from a dragon to a cobra, all in miniature. But they wouldn't stay that way for long, of course.

On the other side of the gates, Konoha forces were slowly appearing as well. Several ANBU stepped out of the shadows as silently and stealthily as a cat would. Recognizable jounin, such as Hatake Kakashi or Maito Gai, appeared with the aid of various jutsus.

Tsunade cracked her knuckles loudly. Jiraiya grinned roguishly, biting his thumb for a few droplets of blood. All sorts of shinobi were appearing behind them, all glowering at the ninja who dared declare war on their precious village. A pinkette kunoichi was pulling on a pair of leather gloves, though her glare itself was practically enough to kill several men. A dog the size of a horse started snarling, the ninja riding on its back growing as well. The more well-trained ninja just watched with blank expressions, but all were emanating killer intent. One of the blank-faced ninja pulled a scroll and a paintbrush out of his pack, whereas another with faceplates started forming seals, just as slowly and deliberately as Kakuzu.

All that remained was for the first jutsu to be thrown, something to set off all of the animosity and rancor pooling in the forest clearing, igniting it like a match near a gas leak. Pein coolly lifted his eyes off of the Hokage's own, instead directing his gaze at the Hokage tower.

Though it was too far to see, he knew the Kyuubi was there. And undoubtedly the damned soul was staring back at him with the same intent that Pein himself held. The intent to kill.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Lots of fighting! Sasori finds a score to settle, Deidara accidentally pisses off the wrong person, Kakuzu's been wanting to test his strength against Tsunade, Konan disobeys a direct order and enters the fighting...and what's this? Kabuto and Hinata sneak in to the village itself!

The Fighting Begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

War was hell. Pure and simple, that was the best word to describe it. Shinobi were tools for killing, but turn a bunch of mass-murdering tools loose on each other? It was chaos, it was bloody, it was horrendous. It was *hell*.

The Leaf had a history of hatred with traitors to their villages, so naturally and unfortunately, Neji found himself targeted early-on. Dispatching a chuunin and his partner was fairly easy, and as far as he knew, only one of them died on the spot. The Hyuuga paled, however, when he spotted Lee in the fray. And the taijutsu specialist made a beeline right for him.

He only had time to take a deep breath before his ex-teammate made it to him. Amid the chaos and killing around them, the two just stared at each other for a long time. Against his wishes, Neji could feel his heartbeat speed up, and he felt a cold sweat breaking out on his brow. This Lee wasn't his ex-teammate. This Lee had nothing but hatred and a hardened heart in those eyes. This Lee felt betrayed, and he was going to make Neji feel the hurt that he felt.

For the first time, he suddenly wondered how wise his decision had been to leave Konoha.

While his mind was going into a minor form of shock, his body sunk low into the traditional Hyuuga stance. Honoring this last habit they shared, Lee rocked back on the balls of his feet into his own preferred fighting stance. They always fought with the same techniques. Now would be no different.

Sasori counted himself fortunate. Not because his opponent was a chuunin, but because he wanted revenge. The pink-haired kunoichi, Sakura, had picked him out from the crowd at the first moment, and right after Pein had thrown the first kunai, she doggedly followed him. Sasori couldn't have been more pleased by this. She couldn't finish the job the first time, and she wouldn't get a second chance.

Apparently she was feeling confident. Even though she didn't have Chiyo to protect her this time. Even though he knew about her monstrous strength and medical abilities. Even though he had upgraded all of his poisons and her little antidote would only speed up the process. Even though he was actually out to *win* this fight.

Sakura just clenched her fists and narrowed her light green eyes at him.

Sasori chuckled from inside Hiruko, and decided that while he'd want to relish this, he didn't want to draw it out. But a certain amount of finesse and irony was called for. Regardless, Deidara had flown off already, and he needed to be kept tabs on, so this had better be a relatively quick slaughter.

Using a *Kawarimi*—one of the few jutsus he was still able to do with his puppet body—Sasori snuck out of his puppet, controlling it from afar. She would be too busy focused on the lesser of the

threats; she wouldn't have noticed this anyway, with all of the confusion around them. He kept low to the ground and movements to a minimum, watching her with a placid, almost cherubic smile.

Sakura dodged and danced around the various projectiles thrown at her, and he just memorized her pattern of evasion. Everyone had one, even himself. It was just a matter of watching out for it.

Finally, instead of sidestepping Hiruko's tail as it shot out towards her neck, she just ducked under it and brought her hands up to grab the ends of the tip. Giving it a pull that obviously was the fullest of her strength, the metal tore with a screech and finally gave way and broke. Sasori hadn't counted on this; his weight wasn't in the puppet to counterbalance her strength, and he hadn't expected her to be so risky in disabling the weapon, either.

Though he only had a faint grasp of her behavior, Sasori decided to act now before his favorite puppet got torn to pieces. The memory of what she had done to Hiruko last time flashed before his eyes. It was too early in to be losing such valuable weapons, even if it was for a good cause. The remaining, unharmed metal links slithered out and snapped towards her like a whip, fastening themselves around her midsection before she could do much more than offer a curse. One of her arms was pinned, but the other was free.

Sakura began punching the metal as hard as she could, trying to get an angle where she could pull the links apart and break his grasp. Or so she thought. Whether or not it was actually *connected* to Hiruko was irrelevant. It just made things easier that way. He looped another coil around her waist for good measure. And while she was grappling with the tightening loops, Sasori snuck a chakra string over to the detached point, still glistening with poison.

Partly due to late reactions and partly due to the crushing metal forcing the air out of her lungs, the pinkette medic couldn't do a thing to stop the attack. She managed to kick her leg out in time to avoid it completely cutting off the limb, but just barely. As it was, it slashed cleanly through tendon and muscle alike, and the force of it shattered her femur. Off-balanced and immediately trying to get her hands down to fix some of the injuries before they got bad—probably ignoring the poison for now—Sakura didn't have a clue as to the danger that was sneaking up behind her.

Sasori slid the kunai cleanly into the back of her neck, the tip of the knife coming out just below her collarbone. He had detached one of the wing-like blades from his back, and that was the other one he forced into her neck. Approximately where he had been stabbed by his own parents, when they fought before.

Sliding one of the blades down slowly, cutting through one of her ribs, he knew he finally punctured her heart by the anguished, pain-filled gasp she gave. Leaning forward, Sasori whispered into her ear. "There... now you know how I felt. The only difference is that my art did not allow me to die. You have no such protection."

He left the blades in her and let her body drop to the ground, wiping off some of the blood from her jugular off of his cheek. The last time he had to do that, it was his own blood he was wiping off. Sasori turned with a swirl of his cloak, looking around for the next hapless victim. Or Deidara. Whichever.

-.-.-

Deidara was actually having the time of his life right then. He hadn't felt this alive since his assault

on Iwagakure. And that had been about a decade ago. Unlike most of the fighting, which was centered around the outside wall and just inside the gates, he wasn't hindered by any ninja who could actually *stop* him.

He just soared overhead, dropping bombs on the village itself. He would be surprised if the civilians hadn't been evacuated anyway, but bombs not only caused raw damage, but they started fires. And the quickest way to induce mass panic was by fire, even with shinobi.

Deidara forced his bird into a nearly vertical dive, swooping low over the battlefield outside of the gates. After the initial attack, both forces had spread out in a vain attempt to flank the other, and forest was being decimated at an amazing pace as shinobi clashed. There was a farther-off *boom*, and several dozen trees and a good chunk of the village's wall went up in smoke. Kakuzu's doing, undoubtedly, and as Deidara watched the newfound gap in the wall be flooded with shinobi who hadn't yet found a fighting partner, he decided that he wasn't going to let Kakuzu have all of the fun.

The Iwa artist dedicated himself to blowing up sections of the wall, to further spread out the battlefield, leveling it out for an easier terrain. His bird swooped low to let him drop a spider on some unsuspecting man's head, but unfortunately, Deidara hadn't thought that he was important enough to warrant the attention of the Hokage.

Evidently he was.

With a running start and a great jump, Tsunade landed cleanly on his bird's head. Deidara could only stare in dumb shock before his instincts kicked in and only told him to *run*. Without a second thought, he jumped off of his bird, raised one hand in a sign, and shouted, "*Katsu!*"

The top-heavy blonde woman had just dived after him, and midair didn't allow dodging very well. As he was scrambling for another bird to catch himself with, Tsunade caught up to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. Just before they hit the ground, she let go and planted her feet squarely on his chest, kicking downward as hard as she could.

And as hard as she could was *hard*. Add that in with gravity and momentum... and let's just say that Deidara would definitely be feeling that tomorrow morning. Granted he lived that long.

Luckily, before she could fully get away, he had grabbed her ankle. He pulled her down alongside her, but all he'd had was gravity on his side (and a pathetic amount of muscle mass in his arms). Deidara decided to change tactics halfway through with his counterattack, and instead bit down as hard as he could with the teeth on his palm. The suddenness of this minor pain was enough to distract her long enough for him to maximize a large owl, which he clung to for dear life as the woman tried to get her hands on him again.

Fortunately, one thing Deidara hadn't ever been aware of was how much Kakuzu had wanted to test his massive strength against Tsunade's. Before he could do more than blink in sheer amazement, the two titans of strength clashed, and began to try to throw each other while simultaneously cast jutsus without the use of their hands.

He didn't have time to celebrate losing her, as for the second time in his life, a massive dog came out of his peripheral vision, latched onto his shoulder, and dragged him back down to the earth. A vaguely familiar brown-haired ninja in black leather grinned viciously down at him with sharpened canines, placing his foot on Deidara's Iwa hitai-ate. "Remember us?"

"I was *going* to kill him!" Midori shouted angrily, her eyes frosted over in an icy hue, as they had been for the entire free-for-all so far.

Daisuke shrugged, pulling his sword out of a corpse. "It's my job to protect you, Midori-chan. Plus it wouldn't look good if the Rain Lady died so early on."

"I wasn't going to die!" she said in a high voice, scowling at him. "*You* need to go die, Daisuke."

"That wouldn't be very good. I wouldn't get my date then, would I?" he replied cheerily, smiling brightly at her.

"You—look out!" Midori pushed him down and vaulted over him, kicking some enemy that had somehow managed to sneak up during their argument. Daisuke, however, wasn't ever one to let someone else take care of someone who had dared to try to surprise him in a fight.

As soon as she had let go of the man long enough, he reached over her shoulder to stop the kunai that the man had slid into his palm in preparation of her next strike. Midori turned to face him with an even darker scowl, conceding defeat by letting go of her prey, dropping the surprised ninja to the ground. Daisuke smoothly decapitated him with a strike from his sword, not even bothering to wipe off the blood after the third guy.

"I could have handled him." Daisuke said simply, shrugging.

"He would have slit your throat, idiot." she snapped, making a great show of looking around for any more enemies who were close enough for her to take her anger out on. "Some bodyguard you make."

"I take that as a grave insult." he said solemnly, putting on his best serious face. Unfortunately, she had been around him long enough to know that his serious face was just a load of crap. "Okay, I kid. I just wish you wouldn't act so reckless here. You know if you die, then I die too, and while I'm all for dying in the name of love, that's not quite how I'd like it."

Neither of them noticed that the man's corpse behind them had solidified into wood.

When a sharpened spike of a branch shot up out of the ground between them, nearly catching Midori's hand as she was pointing at him, they both noticed, though. Daisuke reflexively cut it, but the wood just kept growing, and then it widened, and he realized a little too late that it was turning into a wall. To separate them. Taking a few step backwards to get a running start—for he didn't want to waste chakra just scaling a wall, for gods' sakes!—Daisuke managed to get halfway up before another sharpened pike shot out and he barely got out of the way. As it was, it managed to rip part of his shirt and give him a small scratch. Just a glancing blow. But he hoped that he wouldn't get splinters.

He stood back on the ground, and decided instead he'd simply go *around* the wall instead of trying to scale it again. If this jutsu was what he thought it was, then it'd do no good to just keep in close proximity to it.

Then he heard a scream on the other side. And then a loud curse by a voice he recognized. Sounds like Yamato had had the great misfortune to catch Midori by surprise. Daisuke decided to switch tactics, again. He'd go *through* the wood. He started by ramming his sword into the nearest bit of the wall to try to get it at an angle where he could cut it. When the wood started fighting back,

however, he figured out that he should have stuck to the go-around-the-wall plan. With a snapping sound, the wood gave a bit, and Daisuke fought valiantly to try to regain his sword. But in the end, the Mokuton simply swallowed it up, hilt and all.

"Oh. So it is you, Daisuke." a voice said to his right, and Daisuke turned to face his opponent.

"Yamato! I thought this was your doing." He noticed one of his faceplates was dented slightly, and he grinned. "I see you caught hold of Midori."

"She has a surprisingly strong backhand." Yamato said simply, stepping out of the wooden wall. He was holding Daisuke's sword in one hand.

"She *is* the Rain Lady."

The ANBU operative paused for a moment to consider the repercussions of continuing to fight a ninja of that rank. Daisuke narrowed his eyes a bit, but still kept on grinning. Yamato liked to overthink his situations, and he could use that to his advantage here.

"...Yes, I suppose that would account for a few things." He tilted his head back up to stare evenly at the Konoha missing-nin. "And I also suppose that since you've defected you have come to be her partner?"

"Something like that..." He didn't feel like saying that he was actually the bodyguard, or that his defection had been somewhat accidental. "Now, if you don't mind... I'd appreciate getting that back." He nodded towards his sword.

Yamato glanced down at the blade in his grasp. "I think not."

"Oh, come on. It was a family heirloom!"

"Daisuke, you never take things seriously. It's a serious flaw, and it can get you into trouble. Especially in things of this magnitude." He waved his hand at the carnage that was all too visible all around them.

"Who says I'm not taking things seriously?" He acted deeply offended, putting a hand to his heart. "I am very serious. That hurts my morale and self-esteem to hear such things from you."

Yamato gave him a flat look that clearly conveyed his response.

"Speaking of self-esteem..." Daisuke started innocently, turning and looking up at the giant wooden wall. "...Hmm."

"What now?" Yamato asked, though it was clear that he didn't really want to know the answer.

"I'm just thinking of all of the 'morning wood' jokes I could make here."

-.-.-

Hinata could barely breathe, let alone see. ANBU masks didn't let you have peripheral vision. Or proper breathing. If she didn't have the Byakugan, she'd probably be the closest thing to being blind without actually losing her sight. Her breath just kept her face uncomfortably warm and she was sweating profusely underneath the combined weight of her cloak, jacket, and shirt. She'd

probably pass out if the temperature rose any. Which it was very likely to do.

Kabuto was hopping along like a mountain goat on the craters and broken trees, completely at ease. She had no idea how he could see; wouldn't his breath be fogging up his glasses? But he appeared to be seeing better than *she* was, and that was saying something. Every few steps he'd perch on some impossibly un-perch-able part of the battlefield and turn back to watch her slow progress. They'd been keeping to the outskirts, and true to her word, she was sticking to Kabuto like glue. He didn't seem to mind her terribly, especially when she warned him of incoming jutsus or projectiles.

"You *could* take the cloak off. Neji already knows you're here, so it doesn't matter much anymore. Plus it's hindering your movement." he shouted, his voice muffled by his cat mask.

"Umm, no, not yet! I'll take it off l-later..." she called back, pulling her hare mask off for a quick breath of cool morning air. She wiped her brow on her sleeve, still keeping her focus on the combat zone to their left. They were circumnavigating most of the fighting, picking off snipers as they circled around towards the village walls themselves. Already large chunks of it was missing or crumbling, and the Leaf-nin were rushing to defend those areas. Most of the fighting, however, was going on in the large clearing created by some of the more destructive jutsus.

The air was thick with smoke and dust, and the noise was next to deafening. Sounds of jutsus—including the familiar *boom* of Deidara's explosives—shouting, death wails, weapons clanging, and the noise the ground below them itself was making as trees were being uprooted, craters were formed, and things generally fell on top of it. Hinata shook her head, coughing as a blast of dusty, hot air was sent towards them from somewhere near the wall. A wind jutsu, but weakened by distance. And perhaps not meant for them at all.

"Keep going!" Kabuto urged, jumping up into one of the few intact trees in the vicinity. Hinata just nodded, unable to do much else. Already, this was taxing. And not just physically.

A body crashed through the forest just in front of her, momentarily separating them by a shower of splinters and branches. Hinata almost fainted when she saw that it had been the *Hokage* of all people to take the dive.

Tsunade clambered out of the wrecked trees, a bit bloody but looking none the worse for it. She glanced at Hinata, and momentarily a pained look flitted across her face. That vanished when she saw Kabuto. Luckily for both of them, the one who had thrown her appeared out of the mayhem to their left. Kakuzu, in a charge that would have put a rhino to shame. He rammed into Tsunade with his shoulder, and there appeared to be a tidal wave of uprooted trees and dirt where they had both been just before.

Hinata gave Kabuto a wild-eyed look. He just gestured and shouted, "Run!" It was all the prompt she needed, and with a surefootedness that surprised her, she was leaping over the wreckage and joining his side in a full out sprint towards the wall.

Someone else came running at her, but before she could fully react he caught her around the shoulders in a crushing bear hug, sending them both tumbling. Kabuto just gave the man a kick to the jaw that would have put Lee to shame, and Hinata heard something snap inside the man's neck. He instantly let go of her, and she just rolled the body off of her and stood back up. She had lost her hare mask somewhere during all of that, but it was no matter. At this point, she was too terrified to care.

The pair were nearly at the wall now. It was a no-man's land between the edge of the forest and the wall, littered with bodies and weapons. Kabuto stopped her in the shadow of one of the trees,

pointing up at a figure sitting leisurely on top of the wall, spinning a kunai on one finger. Hinata couldn't make out who it was, but she thought she recognized the spiked ponytail. "Sniper," he whispered, edging out into dawn's light. A senbon needle hit the ground not a yard in front of him, and he hastily ducked back into the cover of the shadows. "So the kunai is for show..."

"N-No. Someone else threw that senbon; look at the angle..." The dark-haired kunoichi pointed out to the needle where it was lodged in the dirt. Kabuto nodded thoughtfully, before sinking into a devious smirk.

"So that's the distraction, up there... can you spot the sniper, then?"

"No..." If she had a range of sight like Neji, she might have. But with her limited Byakugan abilities, she couldn't. Just her, Kabuto, and the person atop the wall. "Let me go out, I can do a *Kaiten* to block the needles."

"No, they'd hit you before you could start the spin." Kabuto tapped the side of his mask, thinking. Finally, he said, "I'll be right back."

He disappeared before she could stop him. She couldn't see him with her Byakugan, either, at least not until what felt like an eternity had passed. Hinata just waited and sweated, both from her excess amount of layers and the fact that she was well within the sniper's range, just out of his sight... for the moment. The higher the sun rose, the less shadow cover there'd be.

Kabuto then appeared at the edge of her vision, walking leisurely through the forest, a large grin on his face underneath his mask. Without stopping to brief her on what he'd just done, the medic started jogging, and then running, and then flat sprinting. Hinata's eyes widened as he burst out of the tree cover, and bridged the grassy gap between trees and wall in little more than a second.

He used his forward momentum and ran straight up the wall, and he got halfway up before the senbon caught up with him. Two struck him in the leg, and the last hit his mask with enough force to throw him sideways. Without the chakra gluing his feet to the concrete, he skidded in a diagonal slant down the wall, landing in an unmoving heap at the bottom after a near freefall.

Before he had even started his fall, a figure on large, seemingly feathered wings had swooped out of nowhere. Whoever it was dove down low over the ground, before flying straight up in a parallel run to the wall. Feathers—no, *papers*, Hinata realized, and knew who this reckless dive-bomber was—fluttered down behind the figure as she trailed upwards, before finally lashing out with a type of lance constructed entirely of papers. A previously concealed figure fell off of the wall, the spear still stuck in its chest. It landed with the weapon down, so only impaled itself further on it.

Konan then flew over to where the other person was sitting on the wall, still twirling a kunai nonchalantly. Hinata ignored the overhead activity and rushed to Kabuto's aid now that the imminent danger was gone. His mask had shattered upon the impact with the ground, but he had already sat up, and was casually and calmly pulling the senbon out of his leg. He looked up at her approach, smiling. "I hadn't counted on them aiming for my legs, to tell you the truth. I thought that they'd hit my mask."

"That was a stupid thing to do, regardless." Hinata told him primly, crossing her arms. "What if he'd been in an angle where he could get a needle into your eyeholes?"

"I have glasses. That would have mostly nullified the attack. But it could have shattered the glass, which would be more dangerous..." he trailed off thoughtfully.

Konan landed lightly behind her, exhaling loudly through her nose in what might have been a

snort. She dropped a body at her feet. Hinata looked at it, and immediately regretted it. She had been right; it had been Anko. Well, it *had* been. She was bleeding from so many cuts that she looked like some sort of red effigy of the former kunoichi. Hinata looked away, trying not to throw up.

"Ahh, thank you, Konan-san." Kabuto said with a broad smile, as he picked the shards of porcelain out of his hair.

"She should have stayed out of the battle..." Hinata murmured with a sigh.

Konan gave her a sharp look. "And *you* should have stayed in Ame, Hinata-san." The Hyuuga girl colored, looking away to hide her embarrassment.

"Y-You could have gotten hurt..." she mumbled under her breath, keeping her white eyes on Kabuto instead of the female Akatsuki member.

The older woman just brushed off her cloak, shaking her head. Her hair had fallen out of its usual half-bun, and splayed around her shoulders and down her back haphazardly. Her paper wings fluttered in the morning breeze. "Extra twenty pounds or not, I think I am capable of taking out two unsuspecting ninja, Hinata-san. Now, if you'll excuse me, Pein will have an ulcer if he sees that I'm not where I should be."

"Thank you, again, Konan-san. I understand that you shouldn't be in harm's way, but it was much easier this way. And now we've secured a portion of the wall." He smiled up at her brightly, standing up a little shakily while dusting off his pants.

Konan turned away from him, instead turning to look over her shoulder. She didn't reply for a long moment. "Just try to double-check that the Kyuubi is in the tower. Don't do anything else. The two of you couldn't do much, anyway." It wasn't meant to be an insult, just a statement of fact. Then, with a flap of her paper angel wings, she was safely back in the sky.

Kabuto nodded, though the movement was lost on the blunette woman. "Hinata-chan, can you cast a genjutsu around us to stop people from seeing us?"

"Oh, yes." Again, she cheerfully resorted to the ignore me jutsu. As long as no one was specifically looking for either of them, they would be safe from most of the ninja in the village. Hinata glanced back nervously over her shoulder, just as the ground below their feet rumbled with some explosion. Most of the ninja in the village had their hands full, anyway.

Genjutsu covering them, they snuck into Konoha itself without much trouble. They'd had to stop though, since Kabuto couldn't heal his minor leg injuries, and his limp was slowing them down. She was a bit disconcerted to see how far he'd fallen with his chakra, but she just wordlessly healed the small puncture wounds on his calf. She didn't know much medical jutsu, but she knew the basics. They could surely get by as long as they didn't run into anyone too strong.

"It has been awhile since I've been here..." Kabuto said quietly, but there was an unmistakable conversational tone. Hinata just shrugged, pulling her mask off of her face again. There would be no need to hide her identity if they were covered by the *Houtteoko Onore*.

It had been just over a year for Hinata, too. The city had stayed mainly the same, aside from the eerie silence, and a few destroyed buildings. Very few ninja were still in the village, and those that were passed them by without a second glance.

Unfortunately, one pair of eyes followed them continuously. They never left them to give them a

second glance.

-.-.-

Pein went after his old teacher first. He had a score to settle, and plus Jiraiya was one of the few who still knew enough about him to use it against him. But by the time the sun was up for a few hours, he hadn't gotten anywhere with the Sannin. Jiraiya was just as strong as he'd remembered, and they were going nowhere fast. He had pulled out nearly all of his tricks he'd dare in this fight, and finally decided to try to stage a partial retreat.

He needed to rethink this, figure out a way to get rid of Jiraiya quickly. He was the biggest threat right now. Tsunade could be taken care of next, and then little would stop them from marching into the village itself and taking the Kyuubi.

But Jiraiya wouldn't let him go that easily.

Pein decided to just go on the defensive, and bide his time until he could organize a retreat of his bodies and his forces. More planning than 'go in and kick ass' was required. Ducking under a toad's tongue and the oil spat at him following it, Pein felt that this was getting to be too one-sided. More planning required indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The Rain retreats to regroup and rethink their strategy. Only somehow, three ninja get left behind..behind enemy lines! Hinata and Kabuto manage to find Naruto, but who is this girl who has found them? Meanwhile, the sides tally up the wounded, and the shock begins to appear in the ranks. Itachi stirs up trouble, Pein tries to contain it, and it ends up being Midori to let Deidara know that Hinata is missing.

The First Retreat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Retreats were messier than Pein had originally thought. Of course, his Akatsuki managed to get back to him the second he gave the signal—a howl from his canine summon did the trick—but it was easier for ninja of that level to dispatch or flee from their latest opponent than it was for a chuunin. Or even a jounin.

He ordered those of his Akatsuki that appeared—only Kakuzu and Kisame hadn't—to go back out and break up the fights, and save as many of his men as they could.

So by late afternoon, both sides had untangled themselves from each other, and were taking the proverbial breather.

The Ame side of the battlefield wasn't pretty.

Pein walked stiffly throughout his troops, noting the casualties, and even the fatalities that had been dragged back from the no-man's land. Even gods weren't above this type of sorrow.

A chuunin and a genin who had snuck along huddled around their teammate and jounin sensei's body, too shocked to even cry. Nearby, a blood splattered jounin was on hands and knees, vomiting. It was splattered with blood. Ninja all around him were huddled together or sullenly off on their own, crying, or nursing wounds, or completely gone. Pein knew what war did to shinobi. There were only so many ways to cope, and it usually either desensitized you completely, turned you into a vicious killing machine, or wiped your mind clean. The Akatsuki were all examples of the second type of surviving.

Itachi silently joined him on his walk through the living dead. That was one of the things Pein valued in Itachi; his ability to ignore whatever he chose, and he knew the worth of silence in certain situations. But he didn't want silence now. He needed some sort of human interaction, to cover up the crying and wailing that floated around the area. Even if Itachi was very inhuman most of the time.

"How is Kisame?" Pein asked in a low voice, stopping at a young boy who was clutching a bloody sword for dear life. He knelt down, and gently extracted the weapon from his grasp, breaking his temporary trance. The boy just looked down at his dirty hands, before burying his face in them.

"He is... stabilizing." Itachi chose his words carefully, and kept his voice even more flat than usual. He had turned out like the perfect shinobi; no annoying personality to get in the way of his work. Unlike Deidara. Pein sighed, and stood back up.

"That's good to hear."

Kisame had been the first Akatsuki seriously wounded, and it unnerved Pein that it came so early on in the fighting. But it couldn't have been helped. He had fought against Maito Gai, and the man had the ability to open all eight gates. And he did so. Kisame had lost an arm and most of the bones in his chest and one leg were shattered, but Kakuzu had arrived in time to reattach the arm. Now he just needed a medic and some rest. He wasn't going back into the fighting if the leader could help it.

One problem, though, was that Samehada was missing. Understandably, Kisame had lost it in the

fray.

At least Maito Gai was now dead. Pein didn't know much about the gates, exactly, but he knew that opening all eight eventually killed the user.

"We've lost almost a third of our forces." Itachi stated stiffly. Pein's head snapped around to stare incredulously at him. A *third*? Already? He had underestimated both the Leaf and his need for a more proper plan.

At least none of the Akatsuki had gone down. Instinctively he looked around for Midori. "Anyone that will impact this greatly?" Anyone of high rank, in other words. Mentally, he went down the list of ninja in his head, and used his other five bodies to survey their encampment to check the people off. All ten Akatsuki. Midori—and her bodyguard—were both in fair shape. When he started counting off the jounin, he winced at how many were missing.

"Right now, just concentrate on saving those we can. Call in all of our medics. After things have stabilized, I'll want a full list of the fatalities."

Itachi shifted from foot to foot, almost nervously. This was a rare move in him, so that alone alarmed Pein more than it would have otherwise. "There were only seventeen medics to begin with, sir. One has died. Three are currently missing."

He only had *thirteen* medics?! "Missing...?"

"Yes. I haven't seen them in the group, and they aren't among the bodies that I've noted. No one seems to have seen them, either."

"Were they captured?"

"...Highly unlikely."

The way Itachi said that only served to further frustrate the leader of the Akatsuki. "Itachi, *who* is missing?" He was already making a list of the seventeen. Yakushi Kabuto came immediately to his mind, as he was in charge of them, but he doubted that he would suddenly go missing.

"Yakushi Kabuto." Pein had been wrong before, but now he saw why Itachi knew that they weren't captured. Konoha would be *gloating* if they managed to capture the spy that had eluded them for so long. Kabuto was a sort of prize in that respect. "Ohira Hanako and Hyuuga Hinata."

Pein immediately sought out Deidara in the group. His shoulder was being bandaged by Sasori, and the blonde kept jerking and saying things to him, probably along the lines of 'be more careful'. "Don't let anyone else know of these three. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

"No."

"...I do." Konan had apparently been standing behind them for some time, her arms crossed over her belly. "They're in Konoha. They secured a portion of the wall and went in to make sure that the Kyuubi is indeed in the Hokage tower."

If those three were still inside the village, especially when the retreat had been called, then they would be as good as dead.

"How do *you* know this, Konan?" Pein asked quietly, raising a pierced eyebrow.

"I helped them secure it." She said this almost defiantly. Her partner narrowed his eyes, and

dismissed Itachi with a wave of his hand. The Uchiha understood, and promptly fled the coming argument. "Kabuto-san came to me and asked me for help concerning a sniper."

"And you just helped him. Though I had ordered you to stay back."

The pregnant woman returned his glare, not backing down. "Yes. Kabuto-san has helped me numerous times, and there was little threat."

"Little threat is relevant. I would think that it would be quite a threat to take out a sniper on a section of the wall."

"It wasn't. Kabuto-san provided a suitable distraction."

"So why didn't the Hyuuga girl take out the sniper?"

"She can't *fly*, Pein. I don't think it was overly taxing to kill two women." She put her hand on his shoulder, keeping him at arm's length. He had been unconsciously advancing on her. "You have bigger things to do than to keep me under your thumb. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, I don't doubt that. But you're not just taking care of *yourself*, Konan. You need to recognize that and stay out of the fighting." He turned and walked out of her grasp, and then just looked over his shoulder at her. She glared back, arms now crossed protectively in front of her again.

He didn't notice the smudges of blood on his shoulder where her hand had been.

"Hyuuga-sama!" Hinata jumped when she heard that voice. She had spotted the girl, of course, but she hadn't thought a thing of her. She definitely hadn't thought that the young, dark-haired girl would have spotted her, much less have called to her. She sensed more than felt the protection of the genjutsu melt away around them, and Kabuto was instantly on guard.

The girl ran up to them, a Kumo hitai-ate bouncing on her chest. "Y-You... what are you doing in the village, Hyuuga-sama?" she asked breathlessly.

Kabuto clamped a gloved hand over her mouth, while Hinata reinstated the genjutsu. Hopefully no one had noticed two ninja just appear out of thin air like that. Especially two ninja that the Leaf would love to get their hands on.

But this girl was trouble already. Obviously she wasn't a Konoha-nin, so that meant that she would have to be with the invading forces. And she knew Hinata well enough to pick her out in full ANBU uniform (cloak and all, though she was painfully hot in it), and knew her name, but still called her the most formal title possible. Hinata had never seen her before in her life.

Judging from his expression, Kabuto was sharing this notion. Slowly, he relinquished his grasp on her, and instead placed a finger against his lips to tell her to kindly shut up. She nodded, dark eyes wide. "But... why are you two in the village? Pein-sama just ordered a retreat..."

"Why are *you*?" he hissed in reply. He smirked when she came up with no suitable reply.

Instead, this mysterious girl said, "It's not safe for Hyuuga-sama to be back in Konohagakure. She'll be in a lot of danger if she's caught here."

"...All of us will be in a lot of trouble and danger if we're caught. Now who are you and why did you follow us?"

"O-Ohira. Ohira Hanako." The name didn't ring any bells. She turned to Hinata fully, and she almost looked like she was pleading for her life before them. "I know you wouldn't remember me, but I saved your life, Hyuuga-sama. After I met the A-Akatsuki in Kumo, and they killed Raikage-sama, I defected from the village. So many of us did."

Hinata blinked once, allowing this information to process. "...You... y-you're the one who saved me?" Hanako nodded. She couldn't remember much after her near death experience, let alone this dark haired girl, but it stood to reason that *someone* had to be responsible for the fact that she was still breathing. Unconsciously, her hand went up to the scars that were still on her neck, though hidden by the necklace Neji had gotten for her for her birthday.

"And you defected from the village and joined Ame's forces? Why would you do that?" Kabuto asked lightly.

Hinata just shook her head. "No, don't, Kabuto-kun. I-I believe her." She had another guardian angel, it seemed, even if it was a girl younger than her whose relationship with her was entirely coincidental. Surely she had just been looking out for her, entirely unaware of the genjutsu she had accidentally broken by doing so.

"But... you two are still in danger here. You should get out of the village immediately!" Hanako urged in a whisper. Kabuto rolled his eyes.

"Not yet. We have to get to that tower, to check something..."

"...The Kyuubi?"

Hinata didn't like hearing Naruto referred to in such a manner, but she supposed that it had to be so. As long as she could look at this objectively, she could get through this. They were after the *Kyuubi*, not *Naruto*. "...Yes."

"How are you planning on doing that? Leaf ninja are retreating too; they'll be in this area of the village any moment! And if the Kyuubi is really in that tower, then—"

"We're hidden with genjutsu. But if you keep squealing like that, it's not going to hold up. Just be quiet and follow us." Kabuto snapped irritably, pointing in the general direction of the tower. With the genjutsu covering them, it would be safe—and definitely quicker—to travel by rooftop. And if shinobi were indeed returning to the village, then speed was of the essence.

Hinata activated her Byakugan, checking around for any immediate threats. None. They roof-hopped closer to the tower, and she knew that she only wanted to get a glimpse of what was inside, if it was Naruto. She didn't want to get drawn into this situation any deeper than she had to. Shinobi were starting to enter into her field of vision, however, many of them injured or depleted of a large amount of their chakra.

They passed the hospital, which was full of doctors and nurses with their hearts fluttering like rabbits' in anticipation of the casualties they were going to receive soon. They had so many more medics than Ame did... Well, forces in general, not just medic-nin. Sure, the Rain had the Akatsuki on their side, but that was just ten ninja. Even they couldn't perform miracles.

A slash of angry red entered her vision.

She had gotten close enough to see up into the Hokage tower. Naruto was pacing back and forth

like a caged animal, his chakra red and swirling in agitation. He was scowling, and Hinata recognized the bold whiskers and slitted pupils. He was going into Kyuubi mode.

Before she could react more than a slight gasp, there was a rush of wind by them as three shinobi ran past, not a yard from them.

The Hokage herself, and Jiraiya, and Shizune. The other three instinctively froze. It was only the fact that they were under the genjutsu and they were in such a hurry that they weren't spotted. Long after Tsunade and her councilors were out of sight, the three remained petrified on the rooftop.

It was Kabuto who broke the silence. "He's definitely in there. Wasn't he?"

Hinata could only nod. Seeing Naruto, once again so like the Kyuubi, and having a near brush with death had made her too weak to even reply.

"We should go then..." Hanako whispered fearfully. She glanced around uneasily.

"I agree." Kabuto took her upper arm, steering Hinata back towards the section of wall where they had come.

Neji felt like he was going to throw up. In fact, he would have, if his stomach wasn't already empty from earlier. Though his hands were now cleaned and bandaged, when he looked at them, he still saw blood on them. He had just killed his teammate. He had just *killed* his teammate.

He had just killed his *teammate*.

It had been mostly an accident. Mostly. Or at least, that's what he kept telling himself. Lee was built for taking forceful assaults. He was built like a rock. Neji had seen him go up against Gaara's sand in their first chuunin exam, and worse in their jounin exam. And plus, Lee seemed to have built up a kind of resistance against his *Juuken*. Probably after sparring with him so much, being beaten by the same techniques over and over. And it helped, of course, that he didn't even have to use his chakra.

Tenten... she wasn't built for taking strikes like that. She was a long-range fighter. Lee and Neji were close-combat.

Her kunai had went right through his palm. He hadn't even noticed. His attention was divided between her and Lee. Moreso on her, as she had suddenly thrown herself in front of Lee and in front of his attack. Lee stopped his fist a hair's breadth from the back of her skull.

Neji didn't stop his attack.

It was an accident, it was an accident, it was an accident...

But the Hyuuga's prodigy knew it was nothing of the sort. He had been thinking like a *shinobi*, for god's sake! She was on the opposite side. She had harmed him. She was an enemy to be killed for the good of his cause.

Neji rolled over onto his stomach, lifting himself onto hands and knees to allow himself the luxury of dry heaving. His stomach was already empty. His mind felt empty, too. His heart had to be.

He had just killed his teammate.

He had just *killed* his *teammate*.

Someone with a vaguely recognizable black and red cloak had to pull him and Lee apart, after that. Lee had been on him like a demon. Neji could barely block his attacks. Someone had pulled them apart, and then he was deposited back in the camp and his hand was wrapped by someone who didn't say a word to him.

Tenten had taken a *Juuken* strike straight to the heart. It stopped it nearly instantly. She didn't have time to react, or even say goodbye, or possibly give Neji that one last look of loathing that he deserved.

Neji had done several things in his lifetime that he regretted. Breaking Lee's arm the first time he had tried one of his 'youthful and manly hugs'. Fighting Hinata and nearly killing her in the chuunin exam. Allowing Naruto to break his jaw with a single punch. Distancing himself from the Main House in the first place.

But killing Tenten had to be the worst thing he had ever done. Even going after Lee with the intent to kill was unforgivable. It was the first time in over a year he had killed someone with his bare hands, and the first time in his life that he'd killed a Konoha-nin.

Neji pulled himself together and stood up. He reached back and retied his hair, ignoring his lost hitai-ate. It had come off when Lee managed to get the last punch of their fight in. He probably still had it. Bandages still covered his forehead, but he found himself calmly indifferent to the thought of exposing his marked forehead to these broken people mulling about around him.

He latched on to the first familiar face to present itself. Neji stumbled over, taking a moment to regain his balance, and then walked a bit more steadily towards the head of black hair. Itachi turned calmly and eyed him flatly, his eyes luckily charcoal colored. "Have you seen Hinata-sama?" Neji asked thickly. He paused and turned his head to spit out a mouthful of blood and bile, wiping his chin with his bandaged hand.

"No, I haven't." Itachi sounded almost thoughtful. "No one has, in fact." Maybe that was why.

"...What?" The elder Uchiha's lack of emotion snapped him back to the present more than his actual words. A cold feeling spread out from his stomach into his limbs, and suddenly he wasn't feeling so numb or so dizzy. Tenten had died, and she was nearly jounin level. Hinata had still been a chuunin.

"She's currently missing-in-action. She and two other medics." he replied coolly. "I presume they're still in Konohagakure." Then Itachi fluidly stood up, and walked off in the other direction. Neji watched his back, trying to figure out *why* she was in the village of all places. But... at least she was alive.

Deidara. He had to find Deidara. He would know more about this, or at least have the ability to find out more. He'd probably storm the gates himself if need be. Neji never felt more connected to the overbearing blonde before now.

Neji walked calmly through the ranks of broken, empty-eyed people. Many of them had never seen a war before, let alone been in one.

Then, finally, he spotted the signature long, blonde hair that was feminine enough to belong to only Deidara. He made a beeline for him, but Sasori, who had been sitting beside his partner, stood up

and intercepted him. He took Neji none-too-gently by the arm, turning him around and marching him in the opposite direction. "No."

"What?" the brunette asked flatly. He didn't even try to extract himself from Sasori's grasp. It was like iron.

"Deidara does not know, nor does he need to. He's already been worked up fighting the Hokage and seeing Kisame like that. Go away and don't bother him with useless details." The redhead finally let go of him, giving him a small push to keep him going.

Neji, instead, turned on his heel and attempted to stare down the Akatsuki member. Height was on his side, but Sasori had the advantage of years of experience of glaring. But Neji's hands kept itching, and he could almost feel the blood that wasn't there drying.

"Just stay away from Deidara. If the Hyuuga girl is *still* missing by the end of this skirmish, and her body hasn't turned up, then and only then you can inform him of her absence."

Neji didn't hear a word Sasori just said. His gaze had been caught by movement by Deidara. From this distance, he could still read lips. So he knew exactly what Midori was asking Deidara. "Do you know where Hinata-chan is?"

What had started under the ruse of negotiations quickly escalated into a shouting match at the village gates. Behind her, her forces were watching with a tense air. But it was just harmless shouting. Shouting, Tsunade decided, she could handle. But if this insolent little brat even attempted to do something, he'd have more ninja than even a 'god' could handle on him in a flash. The shinobi of Konohagakure weren't losing another Hokage any time soon.

During their first, rather short, meeting, Pein had kept his cool and calm demeanor.

But faced with how many men he'd lost, and probably the stresses of war itself, he was just as angry as her. And she had finally figured out *where* she had seen him before, too. Even if he had been twenty years younger and minus the bizarre eyes (which also stirred a memory, but that one wasn't as forthcoming). Regardless, Tsunade and Pein stood a good ten feet apart, shouting at the top of their lungs at each other.

He demanded the Kyuubi and Konoha's immediate surrender.

She told him to go to hell.

He told *her* to go to hell.

She told him to shove his demands up his ass.

He called her a stubborn bitch and gestured widely at the village wall. Most of it was intact, but several portions were crumbling or gone completely. "You really think you can defend this position for much longer? In all out war, you might, with raw numbers and confusion. But what if I were to call in just my Akatsuki and storm the village?"

"So why *haven't* you?"

Tsunade had dealt with a lot of new leaders since she was installed as Hokage. They were always all bark and no bite, just testing out their claws on her and her village. But she hadn't ever thought she'd deal with the leader of the *Akatsuki*. And especially now that she recognized him. But the blonde woman didn't dare call him by the name she had known him by; she didn't know what kind of reaction it would evoke.

But even more unsettling was that he had the power behind him to actually back it up. He just didn't quite know how to wield it properly yet, especially in a massive attack. But if he figured out how to, especially before she could come up with a counterstrategy, then Konoha would be in some serious shit.

The supposed Rain Lord was standing beside him. She hadn't spoken a single word all throughout this battle of powers, but Tsunade didn't blame her. She looked young and frail. No doubt a king—well, queen—of straw for the throne of Ame. She was just staring up at the walls with a thoughtful, studious expression. Every now and then, though, she'd jump when one of them said a particularly loud word or phrase, indicating that she was still listening.

Pein sighed, crossing his arms. "We are getting nowhere with these so-called *negotiations*. Can we cut the political bullshit and just leave to go tend to our forces now?"

"See, now you're learning. Insolent little asshole. You're only going to get more of your men killed, if you don't back down now and surrender."

"We'll leave if you give us the Kyuubi."

"No."

"Then I bore of this argument." The calm and collected leader was back. He nodded towards the Rain Lord, and she nodded back at him with a small smile. She turned on her heel and started marching back towards their camp, and Pein followed her. Once they reached the other edge of the battlefield, Tsunade could just make out him jogging to catch up with her, asking her something.

The Hokage was positive she hadn't given anything away that might have been valuable, as far as information went. So why did she suddenly get the feeling that she had just been had? Maybe it was that girl, the way her eyes suddenly darkened to a duller green as she left?

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The fighting resumes, and the death count just keeps getting higher and higher. Hinata gets caught by Shikamaru's shadow jutsu. Itachi and Sasuke square off. Kabuto finds Kakashi with disastrous results. And what's this-Konoha finally takes some prisoners of value...

Battlefield Reunions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The fighting resumed about an hour before dawn. No one slept that night, and the war re-erupted with an accidental explosion when Deidara caught a Konoha scout trying to spy on them. Well, it had been mostly accidental. Okay, so the only real accident was that he found the man in the first place.

What was a little unnerving was the fact that he was a Hyuuga. His white eyes were glossed over in death, and there was an odd, green marking on his forehead. Deidara hadn't ever seen it before, and all he could compare it to was Hinata's unmarked brow. Then again, Neji always kept that headband of his on. Did all Hyuuga except the heir have one? And what was its purpose?

To answer his last mental question, the body gave a slight twitch. Then, suddenly, the eyes corroded and melted down into the skull cavity, leaving gaping holes where the Byakugan-possessed eyes had just been. Deidara made a disgusted face. "Barbaric Leaf, yeah..."

"Wh-What's wrong?" Hinata must have been woken by the explosion. Rubbing her eyes, she stood up and leaned against the nearest tree, searching for him through the darkness.

"Nothing. Just found a spy, yeah. Go back to sleep." he told her cheerfully. Unwillingly, he felt his gaze pulled towards her forehead. Though hidden by bangs, he knew that she didn't have any green marks upon it. Deidara stepped between her and the cadaver's head, gesturing to the generic body without allowing her to see it was one of her clansmen.

Or maybe she recognized the clothing, by the way she frowned. "Deidara-kun—"

Unfortunately, scouts rarely traveled alone. And obviously this man didn't have a clue as to who Deidara was. He hadn't been sleeping in his uniform, but the Konoha forces had to be idiots if they couldn't identify the Akatsuki members by sight alone. Especially given this war.

He was taller than Deidara, which made forcing him into a headlock quite easy. Unfortunately, this man was only a chuunin, or maybe ANBU. That made Deidara's role quite easy. He jammed his elbow back into the man's stomach, giving him just enough leverage to reach back and shove a clay sparrow into his mouth as he gasped. And that, in turn, made his grip slacken, so the blonde had plenty of time to duck out and retreat a few steps before raising his hands in his signature sign. "*Katsu*."

The resulting explosion sprayed both him and Hinata in the man's blood, and while Deidara was used to it, he felt a bit bad when he watched her wipe some out of her eyes with disgust.

Then they both caught a blur of movement just beyond the ring of the forest-filtered moonlight. The blonde man completely disappeared by the time Hinata was across the clearing where he had last stood. By the time she activated her Byakugan, Deidara and whoever had the great misfortune to be chased by him were both gone.

She just looked down at the body at her feet and tried not to throw up when she saw the decayed remains of the eyes and her clan's cursed seal across his forehead.

--

Sasori was woken by someone tripping quite gracelessly over him. At first, he was merely aghast that he had fallen *asleep*. He couldn't remember the last time he had properly slept. Usually he just dozed lightly, and even then, it wasn't exactly often.

Then circumstances kicked back in when the person who tripped over him realized that he had *tripped over him*.

Sasori sat bolt upright and grabbed the nearest thing of the offender, which happened to be the back of the collar of a flak jacket. The first thing he registered was silver hair, and his grip almost slackened. Only for the briefest of moments, he thought it was Kabuto. But then the puppeteer noted the lopsided spikes and mismatched eyes that suddenly came up to stare at him.

Sasori and Kakashi stared a long time at one another. At least, it had seemed like a long time. Deidara could be heard crashing through the undergrowth, slowly coming closer. Brown eyes just stared levelly back into black and Sharingan.

"Copy-Nin."

"So you *are* Sasori then," Kakashi said quietly, blinking finally and breaking their staring contest.

"Yes."

Sasori didn't quite know what prompted him to let the man go. By all intents and purposes, he should have slit his throat then and there, and take out one of the biggest enemies they had within the Leaf. But he didn't. Just before Deidara finally locked on to their position, Sasori released his grasp on Kakashi's vest, and the Copy-Nin had disappeared without a word of thanks.

His partner found him still sitting where he had woken up, staring listlessly off into space. He completely ignored Deidara, thinking about the first of Kabuto's mission reports when he had been stationed in Konoha. *"I met a really interesting ninja today. His name is Kakashi. He's the first one who saw through my act, Sasori-sama. But I don't think it was a mistake on my part; he just seems... observant. I healed his eye, though, so he didn't tell 'father' on me."*

--

Pein woke up irritably. Konan—at least, he thought it was Konan—was shaking him roughly by the shoulders, shouting something about scouts and the Copy-Nin. He sat up and rubbed at his eyes, careful of his piercings, and looked around blearily. "...Huh?"

It wasn't Konan, it was Midori. "Pein-sama, we just found Konoha scouts!" she said in a high voice. Her eyes were dark, though, so he didn't think it was very important. Unlike most other eye-based advanced bloodlines, hers was often activated with her mood. "Deidara-sama killed two of them, but the third—he got away! Sasori-sama said it was the Copy-Nin!"

"Okay. Go back to sleep, Midori." Pein flopped back down. He was much too tired for this. Then, her words finally penetrated the haze of sleep in his mind. "...Alright, go wake everyone up. Might as well use this to our advantage."

Konoha would of course have scouts on their location, though it wasn't exactly a secret. He also stationed a scout on the village, though Pein seriously doubted that Zetsu would be caught so easily. That man was only seen when he wanted to be.

Midori was already gone, and the ginger-haired man yet again sat up. He took a moment to check in with his other bodies, and see how the troops were doing. Most of them were sleeping like the dead. Then he wearily stood up, looking around for his uniform. Konan was sleeping on it. She was curled up around her pregnant belly, both of her hands limply wrapped around it. Her hair had long ago fallen out of its bun, and she had gotten to the point where she hadn't cared if it was up or down. Her makeup was smeared with sweat and sleep, but Pein thought she looked just as beautiful as ever.

He put a hand on her side to wake her up. Konan's eyes snapped open, and she sucked in a breath and cringed. Pein knew that reaction. That was a reaction of pain. To try to cover the slipup, she shakily sat up, leaning back on her arms and yawning openly. "What's going on?"

"Are you hurt?" he asked quietly. He didn't miss when she wrapped his cloak up around her waist, crossing her arms.

"No. Of course not."

"Where are you injured?"

"I'm not."

"Did you get it from the sniper?"

"It—It's just a scratch."

"Is it poisoned?"

"No. Of course not."

Pein attempted to stare her down, even though it was basically impossible to do something like that to a pregnant woman. Especially one as stubborn as Konan. "You got a 'scratch' on your stomach."

"It didn't hurt the baby."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It's just a scratch."

"Have any medics looked at it?"

"It's just a *scratch*."

He noticed dried blood on her palms for the first time. Superficial wounds tended to bleed profusely, but so did the deepest ones. "You are to stay back at least a kilometer from the front lines now."

"No. I can keep airborne, out of range—"

"That was an *order*." Pein invested all of the authority he dared to use in his voice. Konan narrowed her eyes, one hand frozen by her face where she had been just about to wipe some hair out of her face.

Then, she stood up, and dusted off his uniform. She made it clear that she was taking it with her. Konan then inclined her head in his general direction, keeping her eyes averted. "Yes. Of course. As you wish." Her tone implied that these would be the last words she spoke to him for quite some time, as childish as it would be. Even if it was immature, Pein wondered why that hurt, as he watched her walk stiffly away.

"And get a medic to check that!" he shouted after her. He knew she'd ignore him.

-.-.-

"I was trying to sleep, Hanako-san," Kabuto pointed out, sitting up. The fellow medic pulled away from him, eyes wide.

"Where is Hyuuga-sama?"

Kabuto rubbed at his eyes, trying not to yawn or snap at the girl. She had taken a possessive stance towards Hinata, which was no doubt considered 'cute', but right now, it was just irritating. Plus, Hinata would win in a fair fight against her hands down. Still, Hanako considered herself some sort of guardian angel. Just because of some mission in Kumo that Kabuto really wished hadn't happened. "She doesn't like being called that. She was called that for the first decade or so of her life, and I bet that would get *very* annoying."

Hanako just stared at him, waiting for the answer to her question.

"I assume she's sleeping with Deidara. The blonde one that doesn't like you much." he replied wearily, pushing his glasses up onto his nose. The Kumo-nin blinked, then flushed and frowned.

"Oh. Him." Apparently there was a basis for that mutual dislike, but Kabuto was too tired to care particularly. Being woken up at whatever unholy hour this was robbed him of most of his curiosity. "Well, you need to get up anyway, Kabuto-taichou. Pein-sama has ordered a mobilization."

Of course, he thought sourly. With another yawn, Kabuto stood up and stretched, listening to his shoulders pop. "Right. Go wake up the other medics, please." She must have recognized the 'leave me the hell alone' tone in his voice, because she obediently scampered off.

"It's been awhile since I've seen you sleep that deeply in actual company. Today must have taken a lot out of you." Kabuto closed his eyes and grit his teeth when he heard Sasori's voice. Then, schooling his face into one of pleasant surprise, he turned around and nodded politely in his master's direction.

"Not quite. I just see no need to waste proper sleep when my chakra is already exhausted." he replied flatly. Sasori just nodded thoughtfully.

"I just saw your friend, Kabuto." So this would be the reason that Sasori came to see him, of all people. And his 'friend' could only mean one person. Unfortunately, 'seeing' someone in Sasori's terms was as good as saying he killed them.

"That's... nice."

"Deidara chased him into me. Quite literally; he tripped over me. That's not the mark of a good shinobi, Kabuto." Sasori continued blithely, smiling slightly. Kabuto could have smacked his head.

Typical Kakashi, too busy worrying about one enemy to completely stumble over another. He unfortunately tended to do that quite a lot. And while he usually could figure out a good way out of the unwanted situation, Sasori wasn't exactly a pushover. Kabuto absentmindedly rubbed his throat. He agreed with that last statement wholeheartedly.

"Deidara makes a good distraction, even for good shinobi, Sasori-sama." Kabuto said brightly. Sasori scowled at him.

"I didn't kill him."

"...Oh." Somehow, it would have been easier if he had. Without Kakashi, there would sure be a lot less things on Kabuto's 'to do before I die' list to complete. But Sasori, of all people, letting someone go? Especially since he *knew* who the Copy-Nin was. He had no great love for him. "Why not?"

"Because. I'll just let *you* kill him, Kabuto. Because I'm sure you'd like to do that. After all, he's the one who is responsible for putting you in this predicament in the first place."

No, it was Orochimaru who did this to me, he wanted to reply. He really, really wanted to reply with that. If only for Sasori's reaction. But instead, Kabuto just inclined his head and said, "Something like that."

Far off, a dog howled. Then another, and then a third, harmonizing in different pitches. The leader's call for his precious Akatsuki. Sasori looked up, and then shook his head minutely. "I'll be off, then. Be careful around those Konoha-nin, Kabuto."

He departed and left Kabuto with the company of only his own thoughts for the first time in a few days. He brought a hand up to run through his hair, but stopped halfway up, and instead ran his thumb along his bottom lip. So Kakashi had finally let himself be spotted among the enemy...

"Wow, I hadn't known you had that close of a relationship to an Akatsuki member, Kabuto-taichou."

"Hanako-san, I thought I had *told* you to go wake up the others." Kabuto ground out through gritted teeth. The girl laughed in embarrassment and hopped out of the tree, finally disappearing for good.

--.-

The fighting resumed in full force once it was light enough to see properly. Which, for ninja, is quite surprisingly dark. And even so, it was almost like a game of hide-and-seek. One's sight was severely limited, and most of it was lit by the moon, stars, and various jutsus. If you could see the moonlight reflected in someone's eyes or on cold metal, chances are you should probably attack.

Itachi was even more handicapped. He could barely see as it was, and his excessive use of the Sharingan wasn't helping things. The darkness made him practically blind. And while he'd usually have Kisame to watch his back for him, now he had no such cover. Still, the eldest Uchiha wasn't overly concerned. He just watched the darkness, listening to the sounds of the battle going on around him, standing perfectly still. Occasionally he'd reach out and grab some poor soul who ventured too close to his personal space, like some sort of twisted praying mantis.

If only he had been born with the Byakugan, he wouldn't have this problem. Any of the Sharingan's problems. But he knew that he'd never willingly give up his eyes, no matter how problematic they seemed at times. The Sharingan's benefits far outweighed its costs.

It just annoyed him at times.

Two shinobi ran right past him, but he recognized them. Hinata glanced back at him, her white eyes almost reflective in the sparse moonlight. Itachi stared levelly back at her, until she and Neji were both swallowed up by the darkness once more. The next person who ran past, however, didn't meet such a kind fate.

So Itachi just stood here, completely motionless, aside from when he reached out in a random direction and snagged some hapless victim by the back of a collar or flak jacket.

He knew he didn't need Kisame, but it was interesting, fighting without him, when they had been paired for so long. It wasn't as if he missed him; it was just a statement of fact. It was interesting.

By the time the sun rose, allowing them all to see the battlefield for the first time, Itachi had twenty or more cadavers circling him. And he'd accomplished that just by standing still. As he blinked in the morning's light, the black-haired ninja decided to stop his reactive approach to this war and go out and actually hunt people down.

Itachi sighed, however, when he noticed the shadow behind him. It pulled out a katana, and he ducked when it swiped across where his neck had just been. He stood back up and turned at the same time, staring impassively at his would-be attacker.

Sasuke stared calmly back. "I'm not waiting four months. Your leader can go to hell." he told him calmly.

"I'm busy." Though Itachi didn't mean it, it was eerily reminiscent of all those years ago, when he would tell Sasuke that he'd be too busy to train with him. Judging by the way his eyes narrowed, his younger brother was also forcefully reminded of those times.

-.-.-

"Oh for—will someone go and break those two up?!"

"On it."

Konan and Kisame could do nothing more than just watch as Hidan cheerfully went to the task of breaking up the Uchiha brothers from their impending fight. When Pein had said that they'd have to wait four months, he meant it. But apparently, Sasuke hadn't had the foresight to actually *listen* to the man and bide his time.

So what did the little brat do? Start a scene in the middle of the battlefield.

Konan absently rubbed at her stomach, running her fingers along the scratch on her side. It was just a scratch. Her body would have reacted by now if it had been poisoned, and she was probably just nervous because it was so close to her baby.

Immediately, the woman groaned. When had she started thinking about it as *her baby*? Kisame

tactfully ignored her, instead watching his partner with a growing sneer on his face.

"This is pretty fucking stupid." he growled, tapping his fingers on his knee. They had both been confined to a nearby grassy hillside, condemned to only watching the slaughter below them. It was incredibly boring.

"Yes, it is. But *you* have a good reason to stay out of it. Dead or not, Maito Gai sure did a number on you." Konan couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice. It wasn't as if Kisame deserved to be the point of her anger, but he was the nearest victim.

The Kiri-nin seemed to resign himself to his fate. "Something like that. I just think that Leader-sama is acting too much like a mother hen, and not enough like the god he's supposed to be portraying."

"Agreed." She nodded. His words were completely and irrevocably true, and if she was any other kunoichi, she might have thought it sweet or cute. Instead, she just cursed him and sent the occasional paper jutsu down there to annoy the hell out of him. (Actually, it was pretty funny. The second he'd see some scrap of paper, he'd stop what he was doing and make sure that she and Kisame were still on the hillside. More than once he had gotten nailed in the head by someone's fist or foot while he was distracted.)

"If you'd quit doing that, he might actually do some actual *fighting* with Jiraiya, you know." Kisame pointed out, though he definitely hadn't been objecting when the leader got kicked in the back of the head by the white-haired Sannin.

"Mm, it's what he gets. He has six bodies against sensei; I think he can handle some distraction. Plus it's funny. Maybe if I was busy *fighting* I wouldn't have the time to do such things..."

"Don't kill me for your partner's protective instincts. If Itachi-san was having my kid, I wouldn't be wanting him going out and fighting, either, you know." Kisame poked the side of her stomach with a wry grin. Konan just swatted his hand away, frowning at him.

"I don't think you could handle a pregnant Itachi. He'd go psychotic on us all and try to pull another massacre."

"Probably." He paused thoughtfully. "...In fact, I'm surprised you haven't tried that yet."

"Some days I'm tempted."

It wasn't a coincidence that Pein had told the two Uchiha to stage their final showdown four months from now. In four months, she should have the baby, so she would be out of immediate danger, and the kid could be more easily protected. Which was saying something. Not even the great leader of the Akatsuki knew how much damage two Uchiha could do to themselves and anyone in a twenty kilometer radius.

"Oh, hey, look. Suigetsu went after Hinata. Isn't that cute?" Kisame laughed, pointing down at two barely discernable dots on the far side of the battlefield. Konan just shrugged. "I'm genuinely surprised she hasn't been killed yet. I would've thought that even Deidara could do so much—oh, damn, that other Hyuuga stepped in."

"I think his name is Neji. Isn't he her new guardian? I can't keep track these days."

"No, I think Deidara's still protecting her. See? He just went down to pick her up." True enough, a Deidara-colored dot on a tiny clay bird swooped down over the battlefield, and picked up not only Hinata, but Neji as well. Suigetsu appeared to be waving his large sword angrily at him as he flew

back out of the way.

"What do you think of that team Sasuke acquired? You seem to know Suigetsu, at any rate." Konan asked idly, setting her chin in her hand. Gods, she was bored nearly to tears.

"I knew him when he was still a kid. He and a kid named Haku were training under one of the other Seven Swordsmen; Momochi Zabuza? Then we broke apart and I didn't see them again. Zabuza and I guess Haku died, and somehow that little runt got out of it and got his sword." Kisame ran a hand through his dark hair, rolling his eyes. "And I've never seen the other two before. Didn't Sasori say the chick was Karin or something like that?"

"Kabuto-san seemed to know both of them. They probably were Orochimaru's at one point. He seemed to garner the *weirdest* ninja... how Sasori put up with him I have no idea..." Konan sighed, flicking a lock of hair out of her eyes.

"Sasori seems to put up with a lot of strange shinobi. Where is the little guy, anyway? I can't see him on the battlefield."

"Probably hiding and sniping somewhere." She wasn't overly thrilled to be talking about the puppeteer, but at least it was conversation. Silence would be next to unbearable in their exile. "Oh—there's Kabuto, at least. I'd recognize his hair, anywhere."

Kisame leaned forward, tilting his head to the side. "Yeah... but who's he fighting? He has white hair. It's not Jiraiya."

"...I think it's the Copy-Nin."

"...Wasn't he the one who killed him in the first place?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. Konan nodded. "Oh. So it's revenge, then, between them."

"Something like that. Oh! And look, Sasuke managed to get past Hidan. Itachi doesn't look pleased—oh shit." Both blue-haired ninja jumped slightly when Itachi unleashed a massive fire attack on his brother, from a near point-blank range. Many of the other shinobi in the area stopped and watched Sasuke pick himself back up, apparently only slightly injured. Hidan was nowhere in sight. Probably decapitated, chopped into tiny pieces, and buried somewhere. And swearing profusely, wherever he was.

Kisame was shaking his head with a grin. "That's Itachi-san for you. Ruthless. Even with his own brother. The ideal shinobi."

Konan just smiled to herself, watching the fighting unfold below her.

-.-.-

Kabuto was annoyed. Why was he even fighting? He knew he couldn't fight. Especially not against someone like Kakashi, who was severely holding the upper hand right now. The boy panted, ducking another strike, and continued to move back, only fighting when he needed to defend himself or when he saw a warning, glad that his glasses hid what his eyes were betraying him of at the moment.

Even with the upper hand, however, he could tell Kakashi was holding back. The man was acting

cautious. He could tell something was wrong, but he just couldn't put a finger on it. Probably because Kabuto had never been so blatantly on guard before, and of course, there was the whole matter of rising from the dead a few years earlier. Kakashi knew something was up. He just didn't know what, and he was trying to figure it out. It was obvious, but Kabuto wouldn't drop any hints if he could help it.

Kakashi threw a punch, but he pulled it at the last moment. In retaliation, Kabuto sidestepped him, and delivered a chakra-spiked strike to his upper arm. It was sloppy and nothing near his usual level of power, but he was already nearly drained of chakra. Plus it got his point across: *don't hold back for me.*

Kakashi narrowed his eyes at him, rubbing his arm absently. It would only be a minor pain, now, but in a few hours he might notice how damaged his bicep really was. Kabuto stepped slowly backward, glancing down at his feet to make sure he didn't trip over anything. That would be *just* what he needed; to trip, fall, and let Kakashi pin him for proper questioning.

As long as he was still moving, Kabuto didn't have to say a word to the man.

He took a few measured breaths, and tried to calm his racing heart. To have something to do, he started mentally checking his heart rate. A minute had passed as he continued walking sedately backward, and he counted at least a hundred and thirty beats. Much too fast for someone whose heart was running on a severely depleted chakra supply. His heart was beating away his remaining links to life. Lovely.

Kabuto kept taking deep, slow breaths, until he got his beats per minute down to roughly a hundred and twenty. At least his heart wasn't acting like a frightened rabbit's now. Still, that was dangerously high for someone in his situation.

In short, he had to find a way to get away from Kakashi, go back to skulking around the edges of the fighting, doing nothing much in particular. Time limit or not, maybe he could still survive this war, at least.

"Kabuto," Kakashi said quietly, still following him at a distance of roughly ten feet. Not far enough away for Kabuto to be comfortable. But at least he wasn't within arm's reach.

He didn't say anything in reply. He just kept walking backwards, trying to calm his body down, and trying to get away from Kakashi. Sure, he was glad that Sasori hadn't killed him. But he hadn't exactly wanted to *see* him... did he?

Oh no, he was *not* going to get caught on that train of thought. That would only lead to disaster. He just watched Kakashi with narrowed eyes, keeping the space between them constant.

"Kabuto..." Kakashi repeated softly, clenching his fists. "Say something. Anything. ...Please."

Kabuto shook his head stubbornly. He wasn't going to fall into any traps. Because he knew, he *knew* that if he started talking, he wouldn't be able to stop. He hadn't even told Hinata all of the details, and Sasori only knew from guessing and threatening. No one knew the full story aside from him, and Kakashi was the biggest threat to that secret. If he even said one word, he wouldn't be able to stop, and he'd spill his guts to Kakashi like some sort of terrified kunoichi.

"What's wrong?" Kakashi adopted a kinder tone, bringing his voice up higher than it was. It was a baby tone, and it only served to annoy Kabuto. He never had liked that tone.

"N-Nothing." he spat, bringing up his arms to cross them protectively in front of his chest. It was a

weak move and he knew it, but at least it advertised clearly that he wasn't letting Kakashi anywhere near him any time soon.

Kakashi seemed to take his single word as some sort of gesture of defeat. Or one of those twisted ways of pleading for someone to save him. Kakashi had often thought that Kabuto needed 'saving'. Now was the only time he really *did* need saving, but the Copy-Nin wasn't going to be able to do anything.

Uh-oh. His heart rate was speeding up again. His metaphorical wire was cutting into his fingers even more deeply now. He was slipping. Kabuto shook his head again, shutting his eyes.

Babying tone or not, Kakashi was a ninja, first and foremost. And when the medic shut his eyes, he seized upon the opportunity it presented. Kabuto's eyes snapped open again, just at the last second. His arms uncrossed as he tried to fend off Kakashi, but he just caught his wrists in one hand. Kabuto jumped back to rely on instincts, instead. He let himself fall backward, in order to get a proper foothold for an upward kick.

Kakashi anticipated the move, and only caught Kabuto, hauling him back upright. "Now—are we going to be able to talk civilly, or do I have to get rough?" the jounin asked harshly.

Yet again, Kabuto shook his head. He had already spoken to the man; what more did he want? He wasn't going to be able to 'save' him, like some sort of knight in shining armor. Kabuto was a lost cause, and he knew it. He was only saving Kakashi the trouble of finding it out for himself.

Something like regret flashed across Kakashi's face, and he tightened his grasp on Kabuto's wrists. Medical training took over, and Kabuto knew that he was trying to sprain his wrists, not break them. Breaking them wouldn't hurt as much in the short run. Kakashi was going for immediate gratification, and he really would use force if necessary.

Kabuto knew he couldn't afford to heal his wrists if Kakashi managed to sprain them. He didn't have the energy. But he also knew that such petty pain wouldn't be anything more than an annoyance, until he tried to fight again. Then it might become more than a mere irritation.

"Kabuto, tell me what's wrong. Why are you like this?" His voice was now cold and clear. This was a demand. He was no longer the kinder, gentler Kakashi; he wanted answers, and he wanted them *now*.

"Nothing."

Kakashi shook his head, and immediately released Kabuto. He stepped away, and held up his hands in a non-threatening gesture. Even so, the medic calculated that one of his wrists was minorly sprained, and both of them would bruise later. If he lived to see later. "Kabuto, have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I would think that *killing me* might have put a dent in any trust I had in you."

It visibly hurt the man, but he quickly recomposed himself. He then dropped his hands limply to the side, and cocked his head, almost like one of those dogs he summoned. "So that's how it is, now? Is this how you want it, Kabuto?"

Kabuto faltered. He stared at the white-haired jounin in front of him, unintentionally letting his eyes widen, and his own arms copy the defeated pose. That was an equally low blow by Kakashi. Still, they were ninja... what more could he expect? He used a powerful weapon against him, and he would only get a similarly strong one used against himself. No matter how many times Kabuto

had vehemently denied that he wanted anything more than a shinobi's relationship, they both knew it to be an utter lie.

"Yes..." he breathed. It was the only answer he could force himself to reply with, no matter how much he just wanted to give up then and there and scream *no*. Kakashi had been picking away at his defenses ever since they first met, and finally he had a big enough space for him to slip completely through. He'd had one for quite some time. It was only now that he dared to use it, though.

"So you want this to be it? Just this. Just us, like this. I can kill you right now, Kabuto. I... I don't know what's wrong, but it's affected you in a bad way. I can snap your neck like a twig right now."

He felt his heartbeat increase with each word the man said. He was getting agitated again. Stress was becoming as deadly as any tool, and Kakashi was slowly killing him with these words of his. Kabuto looked down at his sandals. "Kashi... could you really do it *again*?" He looked back up at his opponent—no, his *enemy*. That's what they were. It's what they had to be. Nothing but enemy shinobi, on separate sides of this war. "Could you really kill me again." It wasn't a question; it was more of a demand to know. Did the illustrious Copy-Nin have it in him to kill the same ninja twice?

His heart was thundering in his ribcage and his ears. He almost doubted that he'd be able to hear Kakashi's reply over it. He didn't even bother counting how many times it beat per minute; it was so fast, so dangerous, but he couldn't concentrate on how close to finally slipping off that wire he was. He only wanted one word from Kakashi. One single word.

Kakashi didn't reply. He just sat there, and stared at him, stared at him like he had just dealt him a fatal blow. Kabuto couldn't help but stare back, panting slightly from the exertion just this conversation gave him. Just being *near* him was taking an incredible toll on his body. He probably needed a soldier pill right now, but Kabuto just heard his heartbeat in his ears and watched Kakashi's masked lips for the inevitable reply.

Finally, he took a step forward. So did Kabuto. Kakashi took another, and then looked away. Kabuto remained where he was, eyes wide behind his glasses. They had fallen down slightly on his nose, but he couldn't bring himself to push them back up. He felt frozen. Would Kakashi really carry out on his threat? Would he die again, not from chakra exhaustion, but from the same man who killed him the first time? The irony was almost too much to bear.

"..." Kakashi opened his mouth, but instead of speaking, just exhaled loudly. Kabuto could have sworn his heart skipped a beat or two. "...Kabuto..."

"A-Answer me." Kabuto demanded, biting his lip. Why did he suddenly feel so dizzy? He was probably hyperventilating, but hopefully the excess oxygen would only keep up with his increased heart rate.

"...No."

And with that simple word, the thundering in Kabuto's ears finally stopped.

--.-

Hinata had been told in no unclear terms to 'stay by Kabuto'. By both Neji and even Deidara. She

had been told explicitly to stay by the medic and 'stick to him like glue'. It was probably that preoccupation that got her stuck in the first place.

Now Ino and Shikamaru were arguing loudly about what to do with her, now that she was successfully caught in one of his many shadow jutsus. Ino was shouting angrily that they should *not* kill her, and just bring her in. Shikamaru was pointing out quite calmly that she was already captured, and it was their job to kill enemy shinobi.

"She doesn't have a single scratch on her headband, Shikamaru! She was kidnapped, anyway, and you know it!"

"She's been MIA for over a year now. By default, she's a missing-nin."

"Then bring her in! I don't think that anyone would like it much if we killed her!" Ino's voice was getting progressively higher and higher, and was rapidly approaching hysterical. Hinata herself was panicking, though she couldn't mimic the wild arm movements of her blonde friend.

"Pl-Please—"

"No, you're going to be quiet." Shikamaru cut in quietly, keeping his gaze focused solely on his teammate. "Both of you."

"Nara Shikamaru, I swear, if you so much as—"

"I'm not going to *kill* her, okay? We are going to hand her over to Hokage-sama and Ibiki during the next lull, and let them deal with this entire thing. I've never liked kidnappings; they're entirely too messy..."

Ino looked relieved, but almost in a sad way. "...Good."

Hinata, however, didn't fancy the idea of being handed over to Morino Ibiki for interrogation. She didn't want to betray the Akatsuki!

She had no idea where Neji had gone, but she could barely spot Deidara locked in combat with Kiba and Akamaru on the fringes of her Byakugan. She was on her own, and she knew that. But she didn't know how to get out of this. The Hyuuga heiress just swallowed nervously, and tried hard to blink back the panicky tears that were clouding her vision. It wouldn't do to break down here, at the mere thought of capture! But she couldn't help it...

"Hey! Shikamaru, it's been awhile, huh? How's my favorite shogi partner?" Hinata would have turned to look at that familiar voice, if she could have moved. Shikamaru turned to look, however, and she was forced to copy the movement.

Daisuke and Midori, standing side-by-side, watching the scene with the kind of interest one would watch a movie. Midori was staring intently at Ino, sizing her up. The Konoha kunoichi mirrored the movements, narrowing her eyes at the newcomers. Of course, she and Shikamaru would both recognize Daisuke, but Midori would be a stranger to them. Hinata remembered how much trouble she'd had fighting the green-eyed Rain Lord, and could only hope selfishly that Ino had the same problems.

"Gone native, Daisuke?" Ino asked sweetly, batting her eyes at him.

"Something like that. More like shanghaied." he replied offhandedly. Midori elbowed him in the side. "So... what are you two doing with poor little Hinata-chan here?"

"Turning her back over to the Leaf. What any good, loyal ninja would do in our situation." Ino said matter-of-factly, planting her fists on her hips.

"I don't think her dad would like that much, don't you think? I heard he already placed Hanabi as heir." Daisuke said conversationally, raising his eyebrows. He hadn't even bothered to wear sunglasses. Either that or he'd lost them in the fighting. Neither of the other two replied, so he continued. "Okay... so look, I don't think anyone would ever forgive me if I let Hinata-chan go and get dragged back to Konoha. So would you two really blame me if I fought you for her?"

"No, I guess we couldn't blame you." Shikamaru conceded.

Daisuke took a running charge, but Shikamaru just let go of Hinata, and his shadow almost immediately attached to the red-eyed jounin's. Midori cart wheeled gracefully out of the way. Hinata also hastily got out of range, and sighed in relief. They'd keep them busy. Shikamaru wouldn't be able to get Midori with his jutsus with her bloodline limit, and Ino's jutsus wouldn't work unless one of them was standing still. And Midori certainly didn't have any qualms about harming Daisuke if it meant hurting an enemy.

Hinata just had to trust those two, and made a note to thank them profusely next time she got the opportunity. But now she had to get away, and find someone she could shadow. She had heard that Kabuto was fighting Kakashi, and she didn't like the sound of that. Kakashi was too strong for Kabuto in his current state. Or at least, she thought so.

She set off at a brisk jog through all of the battles, keeping her eyes peeled for any hostile enemies making a beeline for her. That and any of her men. Deidara had completely vanished from her sight, though she tearfully noticed Akamaru's cooling corpse left behind where he had been earlier. Neji and Kabuto were no where in sight.

Ninja ran past her in all different directions, too busy to even send her a passing glance. Unfortunately, one ninja ran past, and stopped just a few feet from her, and did a slow double-take. Hinata jumped at the suddenness that he appeared with, and took a step back when she recognized him. "...Hinata."

"Sh-Shino..."

He watched her warily from behind his sunglasses, though one of the lenses were cracked. She stared back at him, mouth open in so many things unsaid. She hadn't seen him since that last day she'd been a Konoha-nin. No doubt he'd heard about her uncertain stance, but no doubt he also didn't care. Shino had always been the type who had to figure things out for himself.

"You've grown." he noted carelessly, nodding at her. She blushed, snapping her mouth closed. "No doubt you've learned a lot this past year, Hinata."

"...Um, yes..." She couldn't help but think of all of the genjutsu Itachi had taught her. And even how she'd learn to create those lopsided clay doves she was so fond of. And her first *Kaiten*...

"Are you going to fight me?"

"I-I wouldn't like to, Shino." She couldn't bring herself to add the '-kun'. Even though he had never hurt her, never betrayed her in the least, it just felt wrong to call a technical enemy that. At the same time, Hinata couldn't help but still think of him as her teammate.

Fate intervened then, saving the two the pain of fighting. It intervened in the form of her cousin, and Hinata barely had time to duck as Neji jumped down from Deidara's clay bird, whose shadow

passed over her just as Shino looked up. Neji landed neatly in between them, already ducking low in the traditional *Juuken* stance. "N-Neji—"

"Hyuuga." From the tone of his voice, Shino didn't miss the score across the Leaf symbol on his hitai-ate that Itachi had forced him to make. "You are still taking your duty seriously, I see. That's... good."

Hinata backed up a few steps, especially when Neji turned to look back at her with a glare she hadn't seen since the first chuunin exam. "I thought I told you to stay with Kabuto."

"I-I can't find him..." she replied faintly, backing up a few more steps. She'd rather face Shino than make Neji angry like that. Even so, it wasn't exactly her fault. She had already taken out her fair share of enemies, bloodied her hands enough. *Without* Kabuto. She'd just... lost him somewhere along the line.

"Half a kilometer south-southwest, fighting Kakashi." Neji turned back to Shino. An angry buzzing filled the air, and Hinata couldn't bear to see those two fight. She turned and ran, hoping to dear god that they didn't kill each other. Defaulted to missing-nin or not, she still cared about Shino and Kiba. And even more so Neji. Even if it was to protect her, she didn't want him fighting...

She focused her Byakugan ahead, just so she didn't have to watch them fight behind her. Soon, after much running over craters, body parts and other things she wouldn't have liked to identify, Kabuto and Hatake Kakashi came into view. She noted with some worry that Kabuto's chakra was alarmingly weak. The flow had almost stopped, though his heart was fluttering like a hummingbird in his chest. Kakashi seemed in much of the same state of mild panic, though he was controlling his body better.

They just appeared to be talking, but as Hinata neared, she saw the signs of battle on both of their bodies. Kakashi's right bicep was mangled, and Kabuto's wrists were both injured. The Copy-Nin's leg also had a long cut on it, and was still bleeding freely, though it didn't seem to hamper his movements any. Then, as she watched with her Byakugan, Kabuto's chakra system finally failed.

He fell backward in a harmless-looking faint, though she could see his heart stop momentarily, before starting up again with a weak little shudder. His body was trying to stay alive, pushing the last vestiges of his chakra into the vital organs. Medical training. Instinct, or maybe reflexes.

Kakashi looked surprised, and he started to take a step forward, eyes widening as he opened his mouth to say something. His heart sped up as well.

But Hinata would have none of that. It was mostly luck that she reached him first, however. The kunoichi darted in between the sparse few feet between the two shinobi, her back to Kabuto, who was faintly stirring. She put on her best glare, and lowered her center and gathered chakra into her palms. No doubt Kakashi could get past the *Juuken* somewhat easily, but she would just throw a genjutsu or two at him and see if that didn't do something. She had faced this man once before, and she had failed abysmally. She wasn't about to let the same thing happen again.

"I-If you come any closer—I'll k-kill you." She didn't like the stutter in her voice, but at least she sounded suitably angry.

Kakashi just took another step toward her, adopting a nonchalant expression. But she could still see his heart pounding and his muscles tensing in preparation for some sort of sudden movement. He wasn't even close to as calm as he looked. His eyes occasionally flicked to Kabuto, who was still laying behind her. He took another step forward, and was almost within her *Juuken's* range.

Then three howls rent the air, and they both involuntarily looked up in alarm. By now, the sound was all too familiar. It was Pein's call for a withdrawal of his forces. Hinata felt her own pulse race, and Kakashi was likewise starting to edge in on panic. Kabuto couldn't be moved in the state he was in, could he?

The battlefield was clearing with a haste that alarmed them both. In less than a minute, they were practically the only shinobi there. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Itachi and Hidan both leave the battlefield, the latter still fending off Sasuke. Itachi paused momentarily and glanced at her with his Sharingan. That saw movements in fast forward, right? Hinata had to wonder what he saw.

Then, her Byakugan saw something that not even the Sharingan could spot first. There would be prisoners this time; too many injured had been left behind. This battle had been the bloodiest yet. ANBU were swarming out of Konoha, rushing over to check the casualties and see who would be worth the trouble of bringing back as a prisoner. Three of the masked units departed from the flock and made a beeline straight for them.

Of course they would. If Hatake Kakashi was still on the battlefield, facing off against someone with someone laying right behind her, they would of course rush to his aid.

Kakashi reached forward to restrain her, and she just barely ducked under it. She turned and brought her chakra-filled hands up to hit his own forearms. It would only sting, but hopefully it would stop him from doing that again. He brought his hands back to his chest, shaking them slightly to try to get rid of the burning sensation. Hinata narrowed her eyes, straightening, and trying to ignore the ANBU closing in on them.

She just decided on one, single thing.

She wasn't going to leave Kabuto.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed several shinobi who were still on the battlefield try to turn around to combat the ANBU. If anything, more shinobi ran back out *on* to the scarred landscape to try to get back into the fray, to protect their wounded. Hinata froze when she saw a few black cloaks dispersed in with the crowds that were swarming back, but Kakashi had never been one so easily distracted.

This time, he caught her, and pinned her arms behind her back, while she could do no more than try to kick him and scream. Then, all of a sudden, someone came out of the crowd and hit Kakashi in what seemed like a solid tackle. But in reality, it just swung into a kick to the stomach, to which he released her immediately, to block it.

Hinata knelt down beside Kabuto, now that Kakashi was tied up. She did a quick scan, and saw that he was alive—just barely. He was in no position to eat a soldier pill, so instead she just tried to remember some of the basic medical jutsu she'd picked up from both him and Sakura. Her Byakugan was off so she could concentrate on healing what she could; enough to start his heart properly again, and to stop his liver from failing. She didn't know what to do about his lungs, though they started to fill with air again, now that his heart was demanding more oxygen.

She turned, with a grateful smile, as she noticed Kakashi go flying back. "Thank you, Deidara-kun —"

The only problem was that it wasn't Deidara.

Black hair swung over one shoulder, and red eyes turned to look down at her dispassionately. Hinata's own white eyes widened, and she just stared at Itachi. "Come on, let's go."

She looked down at her lap, and then over at Kabuto, where his eyes fluttered, trying to regain consciousness. "N-No, I won't leave Kabuto-kun." she replied weakly, unsure of how to handle him.

Itachi glanced irritably at the approaching ANBU, who seemed to multiply in number. "We don't have time for his, kunoichi. He's dying anyway. Leave him—" Kakashi retaliated at that time, cutting off the eldest Uchiha. Hinata ducked instinctively as one of them almost clipped her head with a kick, and she turned back to Kabuto. If she could get him awake before the ANBU arrived, then they could still get away.

Unfortunately, Itachi was locked in combat with Kakashi for the moment, and both of them were exhausted enough to make it drag out.

The first ANBU reached them, then, and instead of going for Itachi, sidestepped that tussle and went to secure Hinata and the barely-stirring Kabuto. She flailed back randomly and backhanded a porcelain mask, but only succeeded in hurting her hand. Her hands were roughly pulled back and pinned behind her back, and her head was lifted by the hair for two darkened eyeholes to inspect.

"...Hyuuga Hinata. I thought so." The voice didn't sound happy, or sad, or even mad. He just sounded... interested, if anything. She couldn't place the voice, either, but she could only spit at the wolf mask and try to get her legs out from under her in order to start kicking.

Then, the man let go of her, and fell soundlessly. Itachi was standing behind him, his Sharingan so red they were almost glowing.

Then, the rest of the ANBU caught up.

They didn't have a chance. Akatsuki or not, Itachi was exhausted, and Kakashi had already worn him down as well. Hinata was half-dragged, half-led back to the gates, and she could only shout and flail uselessly.

She was thrown unceremoniously in a holding cell, in a place that she had visited only once before, on a field trip; she was in Morino Ibiki's interrogation building. Konoha-nin were taught to fear this place. Hinata was blindfolded, stripped and tied up. For good measure, some chakra-draining shackles were slapped on her wrists, and then she heard a door slam and felt the darkness all around her.

Hinata tried not to panic. She had been left her tank top and underwear, more out of respect of her lineage than any actual courtesy. Which meant that she might still have some sort of influence as a Hyuuga. Her blindfold was just cloth too, as far as she could tell, so if she could just keep her chakra away from the shackles then she might be able to regain her sight. If only temporarily. Those were both good things.

Itachi, however... she could only hope that he had the foresight to save himself. Because honestly, if the Leaf managed to capture the stray Uchiha, they would never release him. Which meant that Konoha wouldn't want to trade prisoners at all with Ame, which meant that there wouldn't be any further negotiations. ...Which would only end badly.

And Kabuto... He was the worst out of them all. Likewise, the Leaf wouldn't want to trade him, not after he'd made a fool of them—twice, now—and eluded them for so long. But that wasn't what worried her. What worried her was a single fact, a single precaution, a single thing that was required of any ninja entering in this building as a prisoner...

And that was the chakra-draining shackles around her wrists.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: What will happen to the spy now? Kakashi and Kabuto obviously have some sort of a past beyond Kabuto's first murder, and how many other shinobi might that past implicate? And what kind of psychological effects would being held in prison have on these prisoners? Next time, on Dark Knight: "Another Kabuto Chapter" ...!

Another Kabuto Chapter

Chapter Notes

Alternate Title: You Could Be Happy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Oh, *great*. Apparently he didn't even have enough chakra to attract the attention of the shackles. Kabuto could feel only a dull buzzing in his arms, but he could tell his remaining dribbles of chakra weren't exactly dribbling off anywhere any time soon. He was running on the bare essentials, and according to the chakra-draining shackles, he was as good as emptied.

Kabuto gave himself an hour to live.

Tops.

Frankly, he had to wonder how he was even conscious. Maybe his body was letting him actually live his last hour on earth. If staring at the inside of a blindfold was 'living'. So he had an hour left, and it would be spent inside of the Konoha prison... probably getting tortured, soon. Ibiki had always been out for Kabuto; he was considered some sort of prize, just because of his spying prowess. Or something equally nonsensical.

Instead of panic, the medic-nin just felt a cold clarity. He had an hour to make peace with himself. Too bad he couldn't cross anything else off of his 'to do before I die' list. Though maybe he could at least spit in Ibiki's eye. He'd always wanted to do that if he got captured... Kabuto shook his head minutely, accidentally grazing the back of his head on the stone wall behind him. It hurt, but he just mentally numbed it. Pain didn't have any impact on him if he was going to die soon, anyway.

He heard voices though the wooden door of his cell. Coming closer, too, by the sound of it. For a brief moment, Kabuto thought bizarrely of Kakashi.

But then the door opened, and the footsteps that came inside were not Kakashi's. Not heavy enough to be. He caught the last end of a sentence as a second person entered as well. "—Ibiki said that we'd have to move them, anyway. I'm just glad we got stuck with Yakushi, instead of Itachi. I wouldn't like to be one of those moving him."

"Oh, quit your whining already."

Obviously these two weren't very high up in the chain of command, especially if they'd let slip something so important.

So Itachi got captured too? Serves him right, the arrogant bastard. I might just live out my hour in peace, then; Ibiki will be too busy with his gold medal to bug me, Kabuto thought with a kind of distant relief. Because compared to the stray Uchiha, there was no way Kabuto would be picked for interrogation first. He could die peacefully in this hellhole.

One of the two dragged him up by the chain connecting the shackles. Kabuto could barely stand, and made no show of even trying to stay upright. He let himself sag against whoever this was,

more to annoy than anything else. Might as well make a problem out of himself.

"Ugh, shit. The shackles aren't even working." the first voice said.

"No, I bet he's just out of chakra."

Kabuto smirked slightly, thinking, *not quite...* It was an almost vindictive pleasure he took in their one, miniscule mistake. That one error, though, was the difference between life and death for him.

"Yeah, two of the others were almost out of chakra, too. This is a fucking *war*, Takeru. People are gonna run out of chakra." the second voice continued waspishly. Then, the blindfold was taken off, and he was shoved roughly out of the cell and into the hallway. "Start walking, Yakushi."

He didn't deem them important enough to warrant some kind of retort. He just bowed his head, but kept his eyes open for anything he could use. Dying or not, he couldn't stop himself from thinking of that far-off dream called escape...

At least four of them had been captured, then. And with such jewels as Itachi and Kabuto himself, it was highly unlikely that Konoha would want to trade any prisoners of war. He had to wonder if Ame even had any bargaining chips (unless they wanted to turn in one of the Akatsuki or a Hyuuga, he couldn't think of any that they'd be persuaded to even THINK about giving Itachi back with).

But then, rounding a corner and opening one of the nearest cell doors, was none other than Hyuuga Hinata. Kabuto nearly stopped walking, and he only thought, *shit*. Konoha was never going to give any of them back, then.

Her white eyes found his, just as she was being led inside. She stopped stock still, mouth opening slightly in a gasp. Kabuto inhaled sharply; he could see the panic in her eyes. Without any more warning than that, Hinata started screaming. "No, *no*! Get those shackles off of him! TAKE THOSE SHACKLES OFF RIGHT NOW! *He'll die*! He's going to *die*, you bastards, TAKE THEM OFF!" Her voice was shrill; she was hysterical. Kabuto winced, and not only from the high key.

Hinata had been a pampered kunoichi; even she had the sense to recognize that and try to overcome that. But she just wasn't cut out for being taken prisoner, especially by Konoha. They wouldn't exactly be gentle with her. She had probably already been panicking mentally, but seeing him probably set that in physically.

Hinata wouldn't last, especially when Ibiki got around to her.

Her voice was getting higher and her words coarser and more incoherent, and worse; she had started struggling. One of the guards was trying to shove her bodily into the prison cell, but she was resisting for all she was worth. A few more ninja were coming out into the corridor, to see what all the commotion was about.

The man clamped a hand over her mouth, but not before she could get out one last remark. "He is going to *die* because of you!"

And Kakashi had arrived just in time to hear that. He was watching Hinata for a brief moment, but then his eyes, along with the eyes of most of the other guards in the vicinity, traveled over to Kabuto. He was lucky that his own guards decided to shove him in his new cell then.

When Kabuto was six, Sasori had promptly shoved him in Konohagakure, and placed him in the care of the top medic in the village. His foster father accepted him with much love and open arms, but Kabuto instantly hated the man. Because, of course, he wasn't Sasori.

He couldn't remember his real parents. The closest thing he had to a father was Sasori. He didn't accept this newcomer into his life, and the man made him suspicious and angry. Of course, he saw the purpose of this mission, and he saw how his master needed him, but he thought the whole thing rather useless, anyway. (Not that he'd ever tell Sasori *that*.)

So the six-year-old child felt very lost and alone in the big village of Konohagakure.

Within the first month, he had figured out quite easily that people were content with leaving him be if he just showed them what they wanted to see. They wanted to see a happy, carefree, and loved child. He gave them that.

On the inside, Kabuto was insanely proud of his control of his expressions. If he could fool the adults already, he might just become a great shinobi like Sasori some day! Kabuto had already been entered in to the academy here, but of course he had to fail on purpose. If people found out just how good he was, he might get more attention than he needed.

Plus, in an effort to try to give his adoptive son an edge, his 'father' (Kabuto always mentally put quotation marks around the word when he thought of the man) had taught him some basic medical jutsu. That started his curiosity in the healing arts. And then things progressed from there. Kabuto would do all sorts of things to learn new jutsu, ranging from hurting himself on purpose, and just following his dad and pretending to express interest in going to work with him in order to see the inside of the hospital.

So by the time Kabuto met Kakashi for the first time, he was already a master of expression and quite adept at medical jutsu.

He had been on a walk with his 'father', who was showing him around one of the more ninja-oriented parts of the village, when he spotted an older boy practicing in one of the training fields. Fed up with the tour, Kabuto asked sweetly, "Father... that's my friend. Could I please go play with him? Just for a little while? I promise to be home before dark..."

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course..." His father had waved him off and patted him on the head affectionately, before sending his son off to play with a complete and utter stranger.

Kabuto had never seen a non-medical shinobi before (besides his sensei at the academy), especially not one so young. The boy had hair lighter than his own, and he wore a dark blue face mask. Kabuto was absolutely fascinated with him.

He didn't speak when Kabuto walked up to him. He glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, though, and Kabuto hastily pretended to turn around and wave farewell to his father. Then, upon turning back around, he decided that making friends with a shinobi definitely wouldn't hurt him. "Hi. I'm Kabuto." He beamed at the older boy, and acted the appropriate mixture of curious and shy.

"Why are you smiling like that? You look like a dumb kid." he boy said flatly, turning to face him fully. He had his headband covering one eye, though it seemed out of place there, and he kept adjusting the knot.

Kabuto's smile fell a few degrees, but he kept up the charade. This kid was probably just annoyed with him, but he could handle annoyance. Besides, part of him was genuinely interested in such a mysterious and awkwardly dressed ninja. "I'm smiling because I... umm..." he paused himself, and appeared to look for a suitable reason. "Because I just introduced myself?"

"And I bet that you read in some book that people like it when you smile. It's supposed to be disarming, right? Well it's not. You're acting like a spoiled little brat." he replied snappishly. He stopped for a moment to push his headband up onto his forehead, and rubbed on the previously covered eye with a wince. Kabuto gazed in fascination. The eye was scarred and somewhat bruised, though they were fading and mostly healed. But more than that, just before he replaced the forehead protector, the younger boy saw that he had a *red* eye.

And Kabuto knew of only one clan in Konoha with red eyes.

He absolutely *must* make friends with this boy.

"I'm sorry. I'm told that it's polite to smile when introducing yourself," he said matter-of-factly, keeping a childish and sweet tone in his voice.

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Acting all innocent and the like. I told you, it's stupid."

It finally clicked in Kabuto's mind. This young ninja wasn't annoyed with him. He just saw through Kabuto's façade. Something no one had done in the village thus far. The six-year-old was temporarily stunned and at a loss for the proper response. He couldn't come up with anything to redeem himself. But then again, it could just be luck. Surely no one could really see through his persona that he'd painstakingly created. Maybe this ninja didn't like any little kids.

"...Are all ninja as observant as you?" he finally asked, letting his smile drop once and for all. If this boy could see through his fake expressions, it wasn't much use to keep them up. It might just annoy him further.

"No. Not really." He hopped on top of one of the training logs that he had previously been punching and kicking. Running a hand through his spiky hair, he narrowed his visible, black eye, and asked, "Are all kids as annoying and stupid as you?"

"N-No. I mean—no, of course not! You just think you're so cool because you're a ninja already!" Kabuto replied huffily. Part of that was *real* anger, surprisingly enough.

"Yeah. Probably." He shrugged nonchalantly. Kabuto frowned, crossing his arms. This older kid was very stubborn and arrogant. It annoyed him. Especially since he couldn't seem to get him disarmed, like he could the adults. The other boy's eye slid back over to his face and he spoke again. "...What did you say your name was?"

"Kabuto. Yakushi Kabuto. That was my father who was leaving me."

"So why did you lie to him and say I was your friend?" the boy asked politely, crossing his own arms.

Kabuto narrowed his eyes. Okay, so he could read lips. Big deal. "...Because." If he wanted to see Kabuto as an immature, annoying brat, then he would act the part.

One eyebrow was raised. "...Because?" he prompted.

"Because... I was tired of walking all day. My feet hurt. I just want to stay here."

"You've been standing this whole time, so obviously your feet don't hurt too badly, Kabuto-san."

Kabuto knew he was beat. This high-and-mighty ninja had seen through everything he could throw at him. He obviously saw through his façade, annoyingly enough, and now he obviously suspected Kabuto of some sort of ulterior motive for trying to meet with him.

So, sitting down, crossing his legs and arms stubbornly, Kabuto replied haughtily, "Okay, great-and-powerful-shinobi-san, I give up. I am in the first year of the academy, and one of our assignments was to try to trick someone into telling us about themselves, using our expressions and stuff."

"And you thought you'd be a good little student and try it on a shinobi?" the boy drawled, rolling his eyes.

Kabuto nodded. Inside, though, he was smirking. *So the shinobi can be beaten.* Of course he'd had no such assignment, but the ninja took the bait, and seemed to believe his explanation. Maybe Kabuto wasn't that bad of a spy, after all. "So... since you saw through it, anyway, could I still know your name?"

"I don't think so, Kabuto-san."

"What?! Why not?" He jumped to his feet angrily, scowling. The other boy didn't have a logical reasoning for withholding friendly information at this point. Unless he was a better ninja than he'd thought, and had seen through the entire thing... but Kabuto wouldn't allow the paranoia to set in. He could beat this ninja. He wasn't going to win.

"Because. I don't particularly *like* you, kid."

Kabuto contemplated this for a moment. It was the first time he had been really disliked by anyone, and it was by a shinobi, no less. Would all ninja be like this? Hopefully not. So, he tried a new approach: honesty. As the young ninja pushed back his headband to rub at his eye again, Kabuto sighed and said flatly, "Look, shinobi-san. I could probably heal your eye for you."

"...Oh, and now we learn something about the little prick." the boy stopped his hand immediately and slowly pulled it away from his face, now staring down at Kabuto with mismatched eyes, one black, the other red. "You know medical jutsu?"

"Yes. Um, just the basics..." His knowledge could hardly be called 'basic', but he wasn't going to give up all his secrets just to make a friend out of this kid. "My father is the head medic at the hospital. He taught me a few things."

"...Huh. So you want to be a medic-nin when you grow up?"

Kabuto hadn't exactly thought about what he wanted to be when he grew up. Probably not a medic-nin; Sasori didn't require one, he'd said earlier. He just wanted Kabuto to learn medical jutsu because it was some of the toughest jutsus to learn. Sasori had called it practice for him and his chakra control.

"...Maybe." Kabuto averted his eyes, pushing his glasses up further on his nose.

"And why would I trust you with my eye? It's perfectly fine."

"You've been rubbing at it all through our conversation, and the tissue around it is inflamed and bruised. You also have a fresh scar running down it, and judging on the coloration of the iris, it's not even your own eye, but an implant. It's obviously still irritated from the transplant, and your body is still adjusting to it." Kabuto snapped. And then, not a moment later, he realized he probably shouldn't have acted so smart. He bit his tongue and kept quiet, staring at the older boy perched on the log, waiting for his reaction.

"...My name is Kakashi." He hopped down from the log, dusting off his pants and crossing his arms. "You seem like an annoying little brat, Kabuto-san, but I think that you're going to grow up to be a good ninja one day. And when that day comes, I'm going to pound you into the dust for acting a lot stupider than you actually are."

Kabuto did the only thing he could think of in rebuttal. He stuck out his tongue at Kakashi. "Shut up. I'll heal your eye, and you don't tell father."

"Deal."

Kabuto knew, somehow, that Kakashi would wheedle his way into visiting him in his cell. Still, he jumped when the heavy, wooden door echoed with a knock. Kakashi let himself in, mumbling something to the guard posted outside.

"Honestly, who *knocks* on a prison door?" Kabuto asked quietly, narrowing his eyes. Even without his glasses, he could still see Kakashi quite clearly. The glasses were mostly for show, anyway. Plus he'd known the man so long that he really had most every part of him seared into his memory...

"Fine then. I won't give you these." Kakashi said flatly, holding up his shirt and pants. Better than walking around in boxers.

"The sentiment is appreciated, but how the hell would I get dressed, idiot? They may not be draining chakra, but these still aren't exactly pretty bracelets." Kabuto held up his wrists, shaking the chain.

Kakashi didn't reply, and instead just threw the clothes down on the floor. Obviously he hadn't thought that far out, either, but he had just as obviously wanted to bring some sort of appeasement.

Kabuto looked away from him. Right then, he couldn't stand to look at him. He was such a pushover. He thought that Kabuto getting captured was his fault, and while he undoubtedly had a hand in it, he couldn't have exactly turned against Konoha and rescued him. And of *course* he had to have heard Hinata's little breakdown...

"Are you going to let me out?" Kabuto asked quietly, still looking away.

Kakashi shook his head tiredly. "...You know I can't do that."

"Then why did you come here." It wasn't really a question. It was a demand of an explanation. Kabuto didn't have time for the sentimentality that Kakashi undoubtedly wanted. He just wanted this to be cut and dried. But more importantly, he wanted it to be *over*.

But, in a tiny, honest part of his mind, he knew he didn't want it to. He'd be perfectly fine spending his last hour in this world with Kakashi. He wanted *someone* to know what he'd been through. He just wanted to be comforted. He wanted to cry. But his pride wouldn't let him. Just like how his affection for the man still wouldn't allow him to know the truth.

"I... wanted to see you." Kakashi said dully. "You can still wear the pants, you know. Shackles don't much affect them."

"I know." It was a pathetic way to avoid the subject at hand, but Kabuto would let him have this small break. To make him happy, Kabuto snatched them up, and stood up with some difficulty, pulling them on. He glared at Kakashi when he stepped forward to help him. Dying or not, he still had his insufferable pride.

Kabuto slid back down into a sitting position, listening to his heart beat from that small exertion. Kakashi noted this, and finally asked, "What did Hinata mean?"

"Wouldn't *you* like to know?" Kabuto retorted. In that tiny, honest part of his mind, he knew that he didn't want Kakashi to have the pain of knowing the truth. Because dying accidentally or as a cause of this war would be much, much different than dying and knowing he had been dying all along. It would break Kakashi if he knew that.

"Kabuto, please, don't do this." He almost sounded like he was begging, *pleading*, now. It was pathetic. Kabuto kept his gaze solely on his shackles, which were still buzzing pathetically in a vain attempt to drain the last of his life away. Kakashi took this as a sign of acceptance of his position, and continued. "Something's wrong. I know it, I've known it. Orochimaru brought you back to life with that twisted jutsu of his—but what kind of side effect did it have on you? What is going on?"

"It's had several side effects. None of which really matter anymore." Kabuto said vaguely, shaking his head slightly. "None of any of this matters."

"What do you mean? ...Look, I'm on your side with this. They won't execute you if you just tell them what they want to know. You can still get out of this—"

"It's not about that, Kakashi." Kabuto laughed harshly. "Do you even really think that we're going to stay in this prison for long? Pein's probably already planning some elaborate and genius escape plan to get his precious Akatsuki back out of here."

"We're prepared for that." Kakashi replied stiffly, standing up rigidly. "We've already put Itachi in maximum security, and—"

"The only reason he hasn't broken out yet is because you still have *Hinata*. I bet you didn't know that he took her on as a student? I'm waiting for her to nail one of those guards with some jounin-level genjutsu and cause another scene." he divulged out of vindictive glee. Kakashi's face paled slightly, and no doubt he wanted to rush out of there and alert the guards to that, but he knew Kabuto was also finally talking. He didn't want to leave him now.

"No... Konoha wasn't aware of that." he said quietly, leaning against the wall. "Anything else Konoha wasn't aware of?"

"Oh, of course. Konoha is always blissfully unaware of quite a large number of things." Kabuto's voice rose a bit, and he knew that if he didn't stop himself from talking now, he'd spill most of his guts to the jounin. Why did Kakashi always make him do stupid stuff like that? "Like how I was originally Sasori's spy. He was the one who sent me to Orochimaru. I didn't even know about the

man until I was nine or ten. And did you know that I was a spy from the beginning? Imagine, a six-year-old boy fooling all of Konohagakure."

"We've known that you were a spy the whole time, Kabuto."

"You just found it out *after* I died." he snapped, turning his glare back on Kakashi. "What did it feel like, Kakashi? Knowing that you killed Yakushi Kabuto, spy extraordinaire?"

"That thought didn't even cross my mind. I was thinking more about how I killed just regular Kabuto." Kakashi said softly.

"And now you're going to kill me a second time!" Kabuto shouted, grinning up at him. He didn't know what possessed him to grin at the man, but he felt a kind of savage glee when Kakashi paled further, and frowned underneath that mask of his.

"What makes you say that?"

Kabuto knew that he was going to say it. He knew he was going to tell him everything. He felt sick at the mere notion, but he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself. "You know that Hinata was actually the first one who found out? I mean, the first one I *told*. Sasori figured it out on his own. But he thought it was funny. And it just made him hate Orochimaru more. I know he'll be sad to see me die a second time, even if he'd never admit it. I always was valuable to him. I always wanted to be." His voice was dropping back down to its normal pitch, but now he was just babbling, talking faster and faster. Kakashi was probably only barely following, but Kabuto just continued, unconcerned.

"But he just got mad at me for it, whenever I'd try to ignore the problem. I think Konan also knows. She's always known something was up. I was supposed to be the medic for the birth of her baby. But I won't even live that long. She has four more months. Just *four months*. Isn't that sad? I'm not even going to see the birth of the first child born to an Akatsuki member in history. That baby's gotten everyone riled up. Pein is absolutely obsessive with it. Sasori hates it. I just hate it because it's going to be alive when I'm not. It gets to start a new life. I was supposed to do that too, wasn't I?"

"..." Kakashi obviously didn't know which to reply with. Kabuto laughed at him again, and waited, forcing him to respond. "...No."

"And why *not*, Kakashi?"

"Because... you died."

"You killed me."

"You let me."

-.-.-

When he was eight, Kabuto was already familiar with Konohagakure in its entirety. He had mastered enough medical jutsu to probably call himself at least a genin, possibly chuunin. His facial expressions were now perfected to the point that even Kakashi couldn't read him unless he let him, and yet Kabuto was still in the first year of the academy. That was part of his mission; fake

dumb to avoid suspicion, and just gather information. He wasn't here to show off.

He had met a few of Kakashi's 'friends', too. He used these acquaintances as his own friends whenever his father asked about it. Several of them were quite... odd, to say the least. And Kabuto was fairly certain that at least half of them—Kakashi included—were in ANBU. Of course, that information was strictly classified, but when he was invited over to Kakashi's for a sleepover and Kakashi was having bloody nightmares, Kabuto could guess.

"And today, Asuma and Kakashi were helping me with my kunai throwing. I still really can't get the hang of it..." Kabuto told his 'father', sitting at the dinner table. It was almost like a chore, recounting his day to please the man.

"I'm sure it's good for your training, but sometimes, Kabuto, I'd wish that you had some friends your own age," he replied offhandedly.

That single, casual remark set Kabuto to thinking. The next day at the academy, he picked out the best candidate to be his new 'friend'—the top of his class, a quiet kid, but who was antisocial enough to be useful to Kabuto, rather than clingy.

Uchiha Itachi.

Kabuto tracked him down when he was at the park one day, playing with his baby brother. He made it seem like a casual crossing, and walked over curiously to the two Uchiha. "Hey, aren't you in my class?" he asked indifferently.

Itachi only looked at him with hard, black eyes. "Yes. Because obviously you're not smart enough to be in your *own* grade at the academy." He then turned back to his little brother—for the life of him Kabuto couldn't remember his name—and carried him over to the slide. It was almost funny, seeing a six-year-old toting a toddler around. If he hadn't had the most serious look on his face.

"I just haven't gotten the hang of a few things, is all," he replied. Remarks like that had long ago lost their sting. Now he just learned to roll with them. Still, Kabuto made a mental note to pass this year and go up to the next class. "You're pretty good at ninja stuff. I bet it's because of the Sharingan, huh?"

Itachi looked at him sharply, over his brother's black hair. "No." he said tersely, and turned his back on him.

Kabuto felt like he'd done something wrong, but he couldn't think of what, exactly. "Umm... what?"

"I don't have the Sharingan yet. I don't want it. It's stupid." he replied curtly. The medic-nin-in-training just raised both eyebrows, contemplating this development. "Now go away. You're going to infect my otouto with your stupid."

Kabuto ignored the Sharingan problem, and instead concentrated on Itachi's obvious weakness; his brother. Still, he didn't get the chance to talk any more to Itachi that day, as his father came by to pick them up. The man glared at Kabuto like he was complete scum, and that was scary enough to practically put the fear of god into the child.

So instead, he just went over to Kakashi's.

He was somewhat surprised to find Kakashi asleep on his couch, in an impossible position with his arms draped over the edge, and one leg up on the back of the couch. But even more curious was his ensemble; black pants, shin guards and armguards, and a discarded, chipped wolf mask laying on

the floor by his hand. ANBU attire. Kabuto smirked to himself. So he had been right; Kakashi was ANBU.

He had smears of blood on his face and bare chest, and Kabuto frowned at this. Still, it didn't appear to be Kakashi's blood. So instead, he just tiptoed over, got as close to Kakashi's face as he could, and said in a loud voice, "You're a bloody mess, Hatake Kakashi."

That certainly woke him up.

It looked almost as if Kakashi had a mild heart attack, and he nearly attacked Kabuto until he recognized him. Actually, as it was, Kakashi *did* attack him; he just barely managed to duck. It did, however, give him a haircut. Kabuto looked down at the grey hairs on the floor, eyes wide. He hadn't thought it would go *quite* like that.

Kakashi, panting slightly, ground out, "What are you doing here, Kabuto?"

"I came by to see what you were up to." he said innocently, looking up at him with an innocuous expression. "You might want to take a shower. The blood might give people the wrong impression."

Kakashi looked down at the blood on him as if it was a new revelation. "It's nothing..." he mumbled, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. "Get out, Kabuto. Just... get out."

"I don't think so. You are obviously having trouble sleeping, if you're sleeping like that and that deeply." he pointed out matter-of-factly.

The older boy looked up at him, with a rather evil glint in his mismatched eyes. "I said *get out*, Kabuto."

Kabuto decided to high-tail it out of there, then.

And it was a mix of Kakashi's nightmares and Itachi's brother complex that first got Kabuto interested in psychology. He started borrowing his father's books on the subject, reading everything he could to try to get a better understanding of the human mind.

Slowly, he started getting a loose acquaintanceship with Itachi. He figured out his brother's name was Sasuke (*what a dumb name*, he couldn't help but think at the time), and that he was the heir to the clan. He was also engaged to marry the heir of the Hyuuga clan, but he didn't like to think of himself as married, so every time he saw a Hyuuga, he glared at them with as much ferocity as a six-year-old could muster.

Likewise, however, Itachi learned that Kabuto was friends with Kakashi and a bunch of other older ninja, and found out quite accidentally that Kabuto really was a lot more skilled than he acted. Luckily for the spy, Itachi didn't feel the need to bother anyone with that information.

Kabuto introduced the Uchiha heir to his 'father' at that year's graduation. Kabuto had passed, this year, just so he could keep tabs on Itachi. The boy was interesting, in his own detached way. His 'father', though, was absolutely thrilled that his adoptive son made friends with an Uchiha, much less the heir. Itachi's father seemed less than thrilled.

The first time Kabuto decided to take Itachi along with him to Kakashi's, he saw that the two had definitely met before. Kakashi seemed a little off kilter with him, and didn't appear to know how to act. Itachi glared at him the entire time. Kabuto took it in curiously.

Kakashi clearly did not want him in his own home, so he invited them along on what he called a

'nice walk' through the village. The nice walk consisted of uncomfortable silences and Itachi still glaring at him the entire time.

"So... how has your little brother been? Sasuke, right?" Kakashi asked, clearing his throat. It was then that Kabuto figured out that his entire awkward aura was fabricated, perhaps as some sort of protection, or perhaps as some sort of apology. Whether or not Itachi could see through that was hard to tell.

Either way, the youngest didn't reply to him.

"Yakushi, I can't affiliate with you if you hang out with *him*," Itachi told Kabuto instead.

This took him aback, but only slightly. Obviously they had some long-standing rancor—most likely something to do with Kakashi's lone Sharingan—and it wouldn't be his place to intervene, no matter how much he *wanted* to. Because gods, he wanted to.

"Oh. Of course." he blinked instead, and then took a moment to think. "I'm sorry, Itachi-san, but I've known Kakashi longer."

"Understandable." With that, the six-year-old Uchiha heir turned on his heel and stalked away.

Kabuto hadn't seen him again until after he joined the Akatsuki.

"What makes you say that you're going to die?" Kakashi asked, rubbing at his Sharingan. Kabuto's grin lowered itself into a rather violent smirk.

He held up his hands, the shackles' chain clinking slightly. "These. That and Orochimaru."

"What was wrong with the resurrection jutsu?"

Kabuto couldn't help but to roll his eyes. "Many things. It was made as a twisted summoning jutsu, not to actually bring someone back to life. Permanently, at least. Orochimaru knew that, too..."

"So he brought you back to life with it. And somehow it's failing."

"It's always been failing. Just a lot more slowly." He took a breath. "Kashi... I'm dying. Again."

He stared down at him for a long, long moment. "How? You're a medic-nin, Kabuto. You can regrow your *cells* for god's sake. You look perfectly healthy. You haven't taken any real damage yet—" Kakashi was using that almost-pleading-but-not-quite voice again. He was putting too much faith into the healing arts, and his rushed words just echoed his desperation for that faith to push through. Kabuto kicked him in the foot, scowling at him.

"You're an idiot and you haven't learned a thing about proper medical jutsu from me, have you?" Kakashi shook his head wearily, all faith lost. He probably wouldn't trust most medic-nin from now on. Not that he ever really did. "There is more to the human body than superficial flesh wounds. These damn things," he gave his hands another shake, listening to the chain links jingle, "already sucked me dry and now my time's running out."

"You're running on your chakra..." His tone was almost awed. Kabuto could almost watch the

puzzle pieces fall into place for him.

"Yes. I am. And not only that, but my chakra system itself has been failing this whole time. It really wasn't designed as a permanent way to bring back the dead. Orochimaru had just wanted a quick weapon." Somehow it didn't seem as dramatic as it should have been. Quick, rather to the point, and relatively painless. For him, at least. Looking at Kakashi, Kabuto couldn't say the same for him.

The silver-haired medic checked his internal clock when he felt a twinge in his chest. Forty-five minutes had elapsed since he was thrown into this dump. He had fifteen minutes left, if that. Better tie things up quickly, get Kakashi out of the cell. He didn't want him to have to witness his death for a second time.

And then, there were shouts in the hall. Both shinobi looked up in alarm at the door. Something thumped against the wood, splintering it slightly. There was a fight outside. Kabuto supposed that would be the fastest way to get Kakashi out, even if it wasn't his doing.

Kakashi looked back at him, and then at the door again. It was almost as if he was asking permission to leave. Kabuto laughed at him, trying not to wince from the strain it put on his lungs. "Go on. Go defend your honor as a Konoha shinobi."

And then Kabuto made his mistake. In a spurt of dishonest sadism, he added, "I'll be fine."

Kakashi then knew that he didn't have long to live.

"Kabuto—"

"Are you going to let me out?" he asked for the second time.

"N-No. I can't. You know that..." Kakashi replied, glancing at the door again when the shouting intensified. Someone outside of it was laughing, too. "I can't do that, Kabuto."

"Then are you going to kill me?"

"I already answered that, too."

"You really should. It'd be better than dying this way." Kabuto said casually. Kakashi winced at his nonchalant voice. "Besides, it was because of your little stunt that I got captured in the first place. You should have just snapped my neck when you said you would."

"It was bad enough the first time." Kakashi looked toward the door again, shifting slightly on his feet.

"No, no, you used the *Chidori* that time." Kabuto smiled humorlessly at him. He knew that he was getting nervous, and Kakashi knew that he knew. "Go on. Get out of here. Unless you're going to let me out. I'd like to die a free ninja."

"Kabuto, you've never been free in your life." Then, Kakashi disappeared out the door. Kabuto was left speechless, but didn't fail to notice that the Copy-Nin had purposely left the cell door unlocked.

-.-.-

Kabuto's first kiss had actually been with Kakashi. Kakashi had never known this, mostly because it had been when he was asleep.

In the following years, much had happened. Kabuto had been told to spy on Orochimaru, Sasori's partner in the Akatsuki, though their relationship was bitter and strained, to say the least. Except the Sannin had unlocked the mind control jutsu Sasori had placed on him as a child, and his eyes were opened.

He withdrew from society, even to the point of killing his own 'father' when the man asked what was wrong. He never got caught. Kabuto had long ago graduated from the academy, but forced himself to stay as a perpetual genin.

Because he saw what high ranks did to shinobi in the form of Kakashi.

Now that Kabuto knew he was in ANBU, he seemed to relax a lot more around him. At least, he was more open with his ANBU activities. He didn't try to hide his nightmares anymore, and his mood swings weren't always hidden. Kabuto was absolutely fascinated with him. Kakashi would often just stare off into space, or flinch at the oddest phrases, and toss and turn all night long while waking up sobbing, or screaming, or worst of all, just silently and without a word. Those were the nights that Kakashi would finally talk, *honestly*, with Kabuto.

Mostly it was incoherent or babbling. And a lot of it was repeating the same word, or phrase, or moan, over and over. But usually Kabuto could glean some information about the mission he'd been on most recently, or who he'd had to kill, or generally what was the matter. He'd just sit beside him. Not comforting him, not hugging him, not even touching him. But just listening, what Kakashi needed most on nights like that.

Kakashi's nightmares weren't the most interesting thing about him, however. What was probably the most interesting was his personality. Kabuto had met him just in time to catch the tail end of a personality flip; before, he had been rude, mean and arrogant. Now he was much quieter, more laid-back. He'd taken on several bad habits as well, excessive tardiness and reading perverted books among them. Oh, sure, he still had his occasional mean streak, but mostly he seemed fairly relaxed.

And every time Kabuto thought he'd figured out this new personality of his, Kakashi would tweak it a bit, or surprise him in some other way. Kabuto would attempt to predict what he'd do next, and Kakashi would do the thing he'd least expect.

And yet he'd still be completely Kakashi. It would frustrate Kabuto, how he could manage to surprise him yet stay absolutely the same. Even Asuma—one of Kakashi's jounin friends—noted some of the surprises Kakashi could pull out of his sleeve at random. "Kakashi, I don't know how you do it. You act like such a lazy ass *all* the time, and yet you still manage to baffle people with the stupid stunts you pull. No, wait, I take that back—you're a *perverted* lazy ass."

Kakashi just shrugged and continued reading.

And the 'stupid stunts' he pulled could encompass anything from tracking down one of the Sannin for his autograph on his book (and nearly becoming a missing-nin doing so because he somehow hadn't had the foresight to actually inform anyone of where he was going), or in a spurt of uncharacteristic savagery, beat Kabuto into the ground like he'd promised all those years ago. And then he would take said beaten Kabuto back to his house and patch him up.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm just fodder for your Sharingan." Kabuto replied irately, after one of their one-sided sparring matches. "Ouch! Careful, idiot. I think I could fix my arm a lot better than *you*

can with that splint of yours."

"You should learn that medical jutsu isn't the answer to everything." Kakashi replied patiently, pinning the younger boy's other arm with his foot while he wrapped up the broken one. The position didn't exactly display a great level of concern for any other injuries Kabuto might have sustained.

"And the fodder remark?"

"I thought I'd casually ignore it, but apparently you want a reply to it." he said coolly. Kabuto elbowed him—as best he could, considering he now had a splint on his forearm, annoyingly enough—and glared. "Yes, you are. Everyone's fodder for my Sharingan. Just be lucky it wasn't my *Chidori*."

"How is it that you manage to maintain friendships? You're as good as calling me target practice, and I'm honestly nothing more to you than that?" Kakashi finally released him, and Kabuto set about to unwrapping the *thing* he had just put on his arm. The older shinobi cuffed him on the head for his effort.

"Look at it this way, Kabuto. There's no where else to go but up."

That night, when Kakashi was out for the rest of the night, Kabuto was finishing up freeing his arm and running a quick healing jutsu over the fractured bone. He glanced up at the sleeping form, its white hair messed up even more than usual. Kakashi was just strange like that. He'd fight him, just to make a point, and then in the next hour he'd be haphazardly trying to bandage his wounds, completely ignoring his own. Half the time he acted like an older brother, and the other half he was some sort of kicked puppy. Kabuto didn't know how to act around him. Which was saying something, considering his proficiency with reading others' emotions and basing his own reactions upon them.

Kabuto sighed, and snapped the wooden splint for good measure. Kakashi wouldn't be doing such a stupid thing to him like that again any time soon.

He didn't quite know what possessed him to walk over and pull the blanket back up over the sleeping Kakashi, who had kicked it off earlier. Kabuto also didn't know what possessed him to murmur, "Thank you."

But he had a feeling he knew what possessed him to lean down and softly kiss him on the lips. And that's what really bothered him.

-.-.-

Out in the hallway, chaos was the only word that could properly describe it. Obviously the escape attempt was... going. Good or bad, he couldn't tell. But if there was this much aimless shouting and running around, it had to be a suitable distraction. Kabuto slid out of his cell, closing the door silently behind him.

He stooped down by the door to look at an ANBU corpse. He took the mask off, placing it over his own face, and quickly searched the body for something useful. Nothing but a few kunai, but at least he'd be able to defend himself now. Kabuto took a deep breath, and started trying to get his shackles off with the kunai.

After several futile minutes, however, he realized that it would be just that—futile. Plus, they weren't exactly harming him, anyway. Either way, he didn't have any time to waste messing with them further. Kabuto turned and ran down the hall, towards the commotion. Maybe he'd get lucky and there'd be a gaping hole in the wall to escape out of or something.

He turned a corner, and was nearly bowled over by none other than Hidan. Kabuto managed to keep his balance, whereas the immortal had to pick himself back up. Hidan did a double take, and then finally asked, "Kabuto?"

The medic nodded. "Do I want to know what you're doing here?"

Hidan grinned wolfishly. "Does it even fucking matter? Right now let's just concentrate on getting the hell out of here instead."

"Good idea." An Akatsuki bodyguard would be a much better defense than a couple of kunai knives. Kabuto turned around and decided to follow Hidan, wherever he was going. The albino Jashinist at least *seemed* like he knew where he was going. More than Kabuto could say for himself.

Hidan led him down a maze of hallways, turning at random and doubling back several times. Kabuto was starting to doubt his decision to follow him; it was clear that he had no idea whatsoever where he was going. And he could almost feel the clock on his heart counting down with the beats.

Kabuto was finally slipping off of his wire, and hopefully this would be for the last time.

Luckily for the two, there was a method to Hidan's madness. Kind of. It looked like he was slowly circling around, heading back in the direction they'd came. When they arrived back in the corridor that Kabuto had first found himself in, he knew that they were wandering in circles.

Before he could turn to anger, however, Tobi materialized out of the air in front of them. Kabuto stared at him with surprise, but didn't dare comment. "Tell the leader that it's all clear. Couldn't find anyone." Hidan said casually.

"Mmkay!" Tobi chirped, and with another wave of his hand, he vanished again.

"You know, I would have liked to get out of here, instead of checking for other prisoners."

"Well, we have to find Itachi, don't we? The whole reason we even tried this damn stupid plan." he shrugged, and nodded towards the way he'd originally came. "Come on, might as well haul ass out of this dump."

Instead of asking the obvious question, Kabuto had to bite back a laugh. So they couldn't even find *Itachi* of all people. He should have been the easiest to find... Checking his internal clock, he saw that he must have been off in his calculations; more than twenty minutes had passed, but he was still standing.

As they ran down the hall, Kabuto did a quick diagnostics on his own body. His heart was still beating, but he could tell that it would begin to get erratic and weak soon. His brain was still functioning, of course. Lungs were demanding less oxygen, which was disturbing, considering he was nearly sprinting. That *really* couldn't be a good sign.

Then, they came across what looked like the battlefield outside. A whole section of the wall had been knocked—or blown—away, letting in dusty afternoon sunlight. Several bodies and body parts littered the floor, and there was splatters of blood on the remaining walls. Several cell doors lay on

the ground, even more hanging halfway off their hinges. But aside from the corpses, there wasn't anyone in sight.

"...Huh. I guess this might be a bit overkill for a prison breakout... but who gives a shit, right?"

"Yeah, whatever. L-Look, you can go do whatever the hell you want to, but I'm taking my leave now." As if the check on his body reminded it of its problems, Kabuto could feel himself slowing down. Looks like his estimate hadn't been that far off after all. Hidan shrugged, and left him. The failing medic clambered out of the gaping hole in the wall, blinking in the bright sunlight.

At least he'd get to die outside.

Kabuto jumped onto the nearest roof, trying to ignore the jingling the shackles made as he moved. He looked around for any enemy ninja, but the place looked absolutely deserted. At least in his area. He could vaguely sense a large amount of chakra heading away from him, so he was probably heading in the opposite direction as the main mass of the escapees. All the better for him.

Kabuto made it to the wall surrounding the village before he really encountered any real problems. Then they all seemed to converge upon him. He sensed a very familiar chakra signature break away from the mass, and was making a beeline for him.

But worse than that, his heart skipped a beat. Literally. And while his body was trying to compensate for it, his heart was starting to fail. Kabuto sagged against the nearest tree, panting for air while he tried to press a hand to his chest, to use his nonexistent chakra to give himself a jumpstart. Of course he had no such luck.

The foreign chakra made it to him, in the form of Kakashi swinging down onto the branch above him. "So you made it out..." the Copy-Nin said conversationally, jumping down in front of him. His expression immediately changed when he noticed that Kabuto wasn't even standing on his own. Kakashi immediately reached forward and pulled Kabuto forward against his chest, and then sat down, the younger half in his lap.

"Kashi, go away." Kabuto said dully. He didn't have the time to argue, damn it! He didn't want Kakashi to actually *be* here when he died again. It had been bad enough the first time.

"No, I don't think you're in a position to be telling me to do anything, Kabuto." Kakashi said quietly, but firmly. He ran his gloved hands through Kabuto's hair, twirling the ends on his fingers.

"Kakashi." Back to using his full name, instead of the usual 'Kashi' he'd be cruel enough to continually use. "Go. Away. Leave me."

"Never again, baby."

--.-

It was ironic in a very cruel way that the first time they'd seriously had a lasting fight, it was their last as well. It was also somewhat ironic because it was one of the first times in the last decade or so that Kabuto was being completely honest with Sasori.

"—and then that overprotective bastard *still* used all of those stupid pet names to try to talk some 'sense' into me. Ha! He's trying to get me to defect from my spy life and *give myself up*! He's so

stupid sometimes—no, most of the time! I hate that man!" Kabuto ranted, pacing back and forth irritably.

Sasori, reclining on top of Hiruko and using the puppet's tail to clean his nails, glanced up at him with a bored look. "Sure doesn't sound like you hate him. If you really did, I have no doubt that he'd be crow food by now."

Kabuto sighed angrily. "No, he's the fucking *Copy-Nin*. I can't touch him without half the village on my ass in a moment."

"And how is my partner doing?" the redhead asked casually, returning the conversation to its proper path.

"Orochimaru-sama is still going to attack Konoha in a few days, as he'd planned." he reported dutifully, though it was obvious his mind was still elsewhere.

"How stupid." Sasori smirked, chuckling. "I hope he gets himself killed."

"You know he won't. He's too paranoid to take any major risks." Kabuto always thought it was interesting how Sasori would wish for his partner's bloody demise, but never take any steps to actually do it. It was possible that something in the Akatsuki was preventing him from doing that, but Kabuto sometimes couldn't help but think that there was more to it. "It doesn't bother—interfere with any of your plans if he destroys Konoha?"

"Of course not. Otherwise I would have stopped it long ago." Sasori rolled his eyes, his tone becoming clipped. "And in a couple of days, since his position towards the Leaf will become clear, he's going to have to go underground afterward if it fails. That's where you are going to become quite important, Kabuto."

The silver-haired medic didn't bother telling him that the only information he was passing on was the information that Orochimaru *let* him. "Yes, Sasori-sama."

"...And what are you going to do about the Copy-Nin? Kill him in the invasion?"

"No, of course not. I'm not going to spend all my time fighting one man. But-did you know he actually threatened to *kill* me? How stupid is that. He doesn't have it in him, he's much too soft. But I told him I'd *let* him kill me. How much psychological trauma do you suppose that that would cause? I'd love to see his face."

"You're going to die to prove a point." Sasori said flatly. It really was more a statement than a question.

"I'm not overly concerned. I doubt we'll even see each other during the entire thing, much less fight." Kabuto shrugged easily. "Plus, Orochimaru-sama has that resurrection jutsu, you know the one? He'll just bring me back to life..."

--.-

"I'm sorry."

"Shh, you shouldn't be talking."

"No, I really shouldn't, but I don't care, either. And I actually *am* sorry, just so you know."

"So why are you telling me this *now*?"

"...When else am I going to tell you?"

"Shh, don't say things like that."

"Kashi, grow up."

"..."

"...See? That's the kind of stuff I'm sorry for."

"So you're not sorry for... this?"

"No. I brought this upon myself. I am sorry for making you do this again."

"Do what?"

"See me die."

"...I'd forgive you if you didn't do it a second time."

"I don't think I'll be able to do that."

"...Why did you wait so long?"

"For what?"

"To tell me."

"I had never planned on telling you."

"Why not?"

"Because. I'd imagine that the psychological effect would almost be as great on you as it is—was—on me. I'm sure it won't leave a pretty scar."

"Don't start talking about yourself in past tense. You're breaking my heart."

"Joking?"

"Maybe."

"Whatever. Kakashi, I *am* past tense. Half my vitals are shot already. It's a wonder I can even talk coherently."

"As long as your lungs and vocal chords are fine, you should be able to talk."

"I'm so proud. You've managed to pick up some medical knowledge, after all."

The banter died down, however, when Kabuto jerked forward to begin coughing violently. Great, yet again his mutinous body decided to start attacking whatever he had just remembered. He'd have to bear in mind to stop naming body parts.

Kakashi stared at him blankly, but his arms wrapped around Kabuto's shoulders were shaking

slightly. He was tense, but he relaxed a little when the medic stopped coughing. Kabuto looked flatly up at him, again wishing he was somewhere else. He noticed that the Copy-Nin had lost his hitai-ate somewhere along the line, and his hair fell into his eyes without it to hold it back.

"I'm probably going to miss you."

"Only probably?" Kakashi asked lightly, raising both eyebrows and failing miserably at a smile.

"Yeah, only probably. Because if I said I would, it would be too sad—too cliché." Kabuto replied faintly, turning his head so he wouldn't have to look at him. Instead he just managed to bury his face in Kakashi's shoulder.

"Y-Yeah..." His arms tightened a bit around him. "I'll probably miss you, too, then."

Kabuto bit his lip to stop himself from crying. It was just the stress, he told himself. It wasn't the way Kakashi sounded like his heart was breaking. He just didn't want to die again. But really, he knew that truth: he didn't want to leave Kakashi again by dying. "K-Kashi... I-I don't want to d-die again..." Unbidden, a few tears leaked out from the corners of his eyes regardless, but were quickly soaked up by the navy fabric of his shirt.

"Shh, I know, I know..."

"I-I'm sorry, I really a-am. I didn't want to leave y-you, not even for Orochimaru. I-I liked Konoha, because you were in it. Oto and A-Ame don't have y-you." Kabuto pressed his face into Kakashi's shoulder, trying to stop crying. He was frightened of dying again, he was scared of leaving Kakashi again, he was terrified the whole ordeal. But more than the fear was just plain sorrow. He was *sad*. He and Kakashi were both much too young for something like this to happen to them.

"Please, Kabuto... don't leave me again..."

"I-I can't, Kashi, you know I can't..."

"Just please, *try*, for me?"

"I can't!"

"Why not?" Kakashi asked quietly. Kabuto surmised from the way his arms were shaking that he was crying as well. Wow, two adult, male, seasoned shinobi, reduced to tears by something as simple and common as death. It was so pathetic, but Kabuto couldn't help it. He didn't want it any other way. He didn't want to be another nameless, faceless death in this war, with little to no tears shed over.

Of course, he didn't want to be a death in the first place, but things like that can't be helped.

It took most of the strength he possessed, but Kabuto turned his head back to look up at Kakashi's face. He was definitely crying, but his eyes were still locked onto the spy in his arms. Kabuto broke down completely then, sobbing raggedly against his chest. He felt so weak, crying, dying, not being able to *do* something about it... and then dragging Kakashi into it again accidentally.

Or maybe it was accidentally. Kabuto didn't even know anymore. He just knew that if he had to die again, he was glad he could do it in Kakashi's arms one more time. As selfish as it was to want such a thing, to wish such a thing upon another.

"I-I'm s-sorry, Kashi. I never w-wanted to leave y-you, I-I don't know why I l-let you kill m-me the first time... I was just angry! Pl-Please, I'm sorry. I didn't want y-you to go through any of th-

this..." Kabuto tried talking through his tears, but it was proving to be more difficult and taxing than he'd thought. He was already painfully short of breath, and sobbing didn't help things.

"Shh, pl-please don't talk, baby, you're only going to—just please don't talk..." Kakashi whispered hurriedly, bending down so that his face was a mere inch or two from Kabuto's. "Just listen, just for a little bit, okay?"

"Kashi, I-I just... I'm scared..." he whispered in just as soft a voice, quieting his crying a little. His medical training told him that he didn't have enough oxygen, so it would probably be best to calm down and just breathe deeply.

"Ohh, I know you're scared. I would be too. You're so brave, going through all of this," Kakashi murmured soothingly, swallowing audibly. "My brave, brave baby."

"I'm not brave. N-Not really..."

"Shh, don't talk. Yes you are. Oh, I am going to miss you so m-much, I don't know wh-what I'll do without you."

"Kashi, d-don't let go of me. Please." Kabuto was counting his heartbeats again, and it wasn't a pleasing result. Erratic and dangerously low. Fatally low.

"Never, I'll never let you go." As if demonstrating, Kakashi pulled him tighter against his chest, resting his forehead against the medic's. "I love you, you know that, r-right?"

Kabuto just nodded, closing his eyes lightly. "Love you t-too, Kashi..."

"I love you, and you never forget that. You n-never forget that, okay? I-I don't know what I'll do without you, baby, I-I just wish you'd come back to me. Pl-Please. Don't leave me, Kabuto. N-Not again... not again. Please, Kabuto, n-not again. I love y-you, come back to me." He leaned down and kissed him, and Kabuto reopened his eyes, looking up at him with an almost sleepy, peaceful look.

Kabuto smiled faintly, and then closed his eyes again.

He'd finally fallen off the wire. He just hadn't planned on Kakashi catching him this time.

-.-.-

"Are you really planning on killing Sasuke?" Kakashi asked flatly. It was a rule between them, one that had been reiterated many times. If they met on the field of battle, they were nothing more than shinobi. *Enemy* shinobi. So Kakashi was businesslike, almost cold. Kabuto returned it twofold.

"Perhaps. I think it might be an act of mercy, personally, and plus I just really don't like him." Kabuto replied with a smirk, holding the kunai poised over the unconscious boy's throat. Machines beeped all around them, pointing out Sasuke's healthy vitals. Not for much longer they'd be beeping. "Orochimaru-sama wants him, but he doesn't *need* him."

"Does Orochimaru know you're here, Kabuto?"

"Maybe." he fielded with a vicious smile. "I don't see how it concerns you."

Kakashi's eyes narrowed, and Kabuto moved forward to kill the young Uchiha. The Copy-Nin blocked him, predictably, and took down the animated corpse with little difficulty. Kabuto jumped up from his hiding spot among the bodies, heading towards the window while trying hard not to burst out laughing. Kakashi was *so* easy to fool.

But then, the man started a *Chidori* on reflex.

Kabuto saw that he could beat him to the window, to his only escape route. And he didn't race him. In their argument just a week before, Kakashi had threatened to kill him. Kabuto said he would let him. And the spy had never been one to back down off of a promise, now was he?

He slowed down, just a single half-step. Kakashi noted this, a little too late. The *Chidori* that had almost been for show now slammed into Kabuto's chest, and while it missed actually pushing through his body like the last time Kakashi used it to kill, he felt the flesh and bone almost magically disappear under the jutsu.

Kabuto slammed into the opposite wall, and then fell forward on his hands and knees, coughing up blood. He pushed the ANBU mask off of his head, letting it drip down off of his chin and the porcelain. "Sh-Shit, you got my lung. I *h-hate* lung wounds," he spat out another mouthful of blood. He trembled slightly, and then collapsed.

Kakashi rushed over, propping him up against the wall in concern. He almost looked ready to *apologize*, of all things. Kabuto laughed weakly, and stuck his tongue out at him. "T-Told you."

"Oh, Kabuto, you..." He didn't know what he would have finished that sentence with, because the *Chidori* had also partially ruptured his heart. Quick, if bloody, death. Kabuto coughed once more, and then sagged forward, dripping blood onto his shirt.

Kakashi sat there for a long time, rocking slightly, just holding Kabuto. His shinobi's sense told him that this wasn't Kabuto; it was just a body now. But his eyes saw Kabuto, and that's what he wanted to believe. This was still his Kabuto.

After however long that was, he noticed that he was crying. He hadn't cried since Kurenai's funeral. And that had been what, a year ago? A year and a half? He couldn't remember. The time before that, though, the last time he'd cried was when Kabuto had died...

How many more people would die in this war? Kakashi couldn't even begin to wonder. Because it felt like the single most important person had just died, and that all of the fighting should stop. Surely that's how it worked?

Kakashi just pulled Kabuto closer to his chest, and cried harder. For the second time in his life, his heart had died. And it had died along with the silver-haired boy in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Okay, so we know that there was at least some sort of escape attempt.

But how did that work? Why was Hidan looking for Itachi? What had happened? Did everyone else get out? Hinata had a few visitors in prison, too, not all of them as kind as Kakashi had been...Next time, on Dark Knight! Hyuuga reunion, jounin-level genjutsu, an Uchiha's wrath, and Pein's plan!

Pein's Plan Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While fighting without Kisame may have been interesting, being thrown in prison wasn't.

Itachi had a feeling that every protocol had been taken with his capture, and he wouldn't simply be getting out of this problem. Which, frankly, probably wasn't as a disturbing thought as it should have been. Unlike most of the other Akatsuki, he didn't rely on actual weapons that could be taken away from him; when stripped of all of the weaponry he possessed except what really mattered, he didn't care in the least. Kunai and shuriken were trifles compared to his real strength.

But while Konoha didn't—yet—take away that real strength, they did do everything conceivable to put a halt on it. He would have sworn on anything and everything holy that they had put a lead-lined blindfold on him. *Lead-lined*. (It was certainly heavy enough.) If Itachi had been a more expressive man, he might have rolled his eyes.

The eldest Uchiha had just been dozing when someone opened his cell door. Which wasn't exactly a silent event; there were so many locks and bolts on his door, he might have been locked in the Hokage's vault. For all he knew, he was. Itachi counted thirteen locks that were opened with various keys, and two deadbolts, and at least five warding jutsus that had to be undone before whoever it was stepped into his large cell, boot heels echoing.

"Uchiha Itachi."

Itachi didn't reply, though he knew immediately who it was. Morino Ibiki. Of course he'd be the first to be interrogated, but Ibiki would be overestimating Itachi's own interest. He didn't care much about the Akatsuki's plans. Which meant that he usually didn't endeavor to find out about them unless he was informed by the leader.

Ibiki didn't say anything further, but the clicking boot heels drew closer, and circled him. Itachi was trussed up as far as they'd allow a shinobi to be, which surprisingly wasn't very much. Wrists in some extremely dense metal—he'd already tried to break it—with a chakra-draining jutsu slapped on. Ankles likewise bound. Lead-lined blindfold, and hung in a near-kneeling position by his arms on an equally strong chain. Then again, Itachi was too tired to even pull off a proper attempt at escaping.

The captive Akatsuki member yawned instead, closing his eyes against the darkness of the blindfold.

Ibiki prodded him none too gently in the foot. "Tired, huh? Well wake the hell up. You're not going to be getting any more sleep for anytime soon, Uchiha."

Which was precisely why I wanted to sleep, he thought flatly, keeping his mouth shut. Ibiki would have his work cut out for him if he wanted to get a peep out of him. Itachi had been trained both as ANBU and a Konoha jounin, so he could stand up to torture techniques. Moreover, he was Akatsuki. He doubted that very many of the numerous things Ibiki could pull out of his hat would stand up to what Pein did during debriefings.

Speaking of Pein, no doubt that the illustrious leader was already formulating an escape plan. Because cruel or not, Pein was nothing if not loyal to his organization.

-.-.-

"So, because of that swarm of movement, we kept prisoners to a minimum, correct?" Pein asked, his grey eyes turning momentarily to his partner. Konan was looking pointedly in the other direction.

"Yes sir." Midori nodded seriously. "We've captured six of their forces. Konoha has captured four of ours."

"Not bad..." Well, not bad considering it was full-out war. But especially bad considering how depleted his forces were.

And unlike Konoha, Ame's side didn't have any proper prisons. But at the same time, they didn't have any need for interrogation. They had all of the information they needed. So the six captured ninja had merely been penned together and tied up, a few jounin posted as guards, and otherwise unharmed and unnoticed.

"Yes sir." She bobbed her head again, her cinnamon hair swinging in sweat-soaked locks around her face. "But there is the matter of how we're going to get them back..."

"Yeah, I know." He sighed, and sat down in the grass. He noticed from the sight of one of his other (remaining) bodies that most of the ninja in the vicinity took it as a sign to relax, and nearly half of them present also sat down wearily. "They're not going to want to trade, not if they've gotten Itachi..."

"It seems like they got just who they wanted." Daisuke replied easily, tapping his fingers on the hilt of his sword. "The one Konoha Akatsuki member, their Hyuuga ex-heir, the one spy that humiliated them on more than one occasion, and your jounin commander. Not a bad catch at all."

"I'd appreciate it if you shut the hell up, Ikari." Konan snapped at him, shifting from foot to foot. Most of the Akatsuki was like that; they were nervous that one of their own had been captured apparently so easily.

"...You know, *this* is why you shouldn't have taken me out of the fighting," Kisame remarked innocently. "You built this group to operate in pairs. Without me, Itachi was probably blindsided by some jounin and got dragged off by that ponytail of his."

"No, that's not how it happened, yeah." Deidara spoke up, crossing his arms. "He went in to try to get the Copy-Nin off of Bya-chan's back, and that was when the ANBU hive buzzed out of their nest."

"Oh, even better. Now he's decided to grow a heart." Pein groaned, and decided sitting wasn't enough. He laid down on the grass, closing his eyes and sighing. "I don't doubt that he'll stand up under interrogation, but I still don't want him in Konoha hands."

"Bya-chan, too!" Deidara added huffily, eyeing the leader resentfully.

"All four of them. But Itachi's in the worst position. He left after a *massacre*. I doubt that anyone was happy with the carnage he left behind, not to mention he joined up with us after that, so he's just become a bigger enemy to them..."

"We all know of Uchiha's exploits." Sasori said idly, sitting on top of Hiruko. "Just tell us what you plan on doing to spring him."

There were nods of agreement around the group. He'd created an organization of geniuses, and he was still looked to as the one to come up with all of the plans. No matter. "Actually, I already *know* what I'm going to do to spring them. And we're going to carry it through into a full-out invasion."

"Oh?" Kakuzu cocked his head to one side, crossing his arms. "And what are you going to do, Leader-sama? I'd bet a fortune they have every ninja short of the Hokage guarding that prison right now."

"Well, you'd lose a fortune, then." Pein replied complacently, reopening his eyes. He grinned up at the faces he could see. "Tsunade is probably thinking we're going to get desperate, or angry. Either of which would not be good for her. She's probably thinking that we're going to attack the village or try to capture the Kyuubi in retaliation. Half of her forces are going to be guarding that tower."

"So then, she's expecting us to retaliate, and *then* rescue?" Midori asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Most likely. We're just going to switch them around. It's Itachi's job, after all, to capture the Kyuubi."

-.-.-

Hinata was already hyperventilating by the time her blindfold was taken off and she was dragged upright. "You're moving cells, Hyuuga." she was told.

Hinata didn't even hear the guard. She had been one of the 'good' girls all her life. Yes, she hadn't ever lived up to her father's expectations, but she hadn't exactly displeased him in most other ways. She never got grounded or punished like other girls seemed to get. She never had any real problems in the academy, or on missions. She could count the number of times on one hand she'd cursed, or sincerely wished harm upon someone who didn't rightly deserve it. She wasn't vindictive or cruel. She didn't gossip, and she had never led any boys on. She was as close to the definition of a 'good girl' as one could get.

And yet, here she was, in prison.

Oh my god, I'm going to get killed in here, she realized suddenly. *I am going to get tortured and killed.* She felt a shiver run down her spine. Hinata hadn't even been able to protect Kabuto, either, so now he was in the same predicament. Oh, she hoped Itachi had gotten away...

Her father would probably come see her as well. That was almost as scary as the thought of facing Ibiki's torture. He would yell at her, maybe even hit her, tell her what a disgrace she was, how shamed the Hyuuga clan was, all of his usual verbal weapons. If she had been a Branch member, he probably would have had her executed without a second thought. Somehow, that might be easier.

Hinata was dragged to her feet with little consciousness of what was happening to her. Her chakra, despite the shackles, was somewhat safe. As a Hyuuga, she had excellent control, and the main use of the shackles was to stop it from getting to her hands for seals. She just needed to gather it into her eyes for the Byakugan.

Kabuto... Kabuto wasn't so lucky. Hinata didn't know how well he could control his own chakra, but he didn't have much to begin with. Moreover, he was completely chakra-dependent. Hopefully someone had had the foresight to check his levels, and maybe if he'd gotten lucky they hadn't wanted to waste a pair on him...

The heiress was turned a corner, and a cell door in front of her opened. She heard footsteps coming down the hall towards them, and looked dully over to see who it might be.

Kabuto, looking just as surprised to see her as she was to see him. Hinata's eyes immediately went down to his hands—chakra-draining shackles. *Oh god no.* "...No..." she whispered, eyes widening. The guard handling her gave her a shove towards the cell, but she dug in her heels and backed up again. "No, *no!* Get those shackles off of him!"

The guards looked at each other in surprise. Hinata hadn't spoken a single word up until now, and suddenly she was shouting at them. The pair guarding Kabuto looked somewhat amused.

Hinata shook her head, screaming, "TAKE THOSE SHACKLES OFF RIGHT NOW!" Kabuto looked down guiltily at the cuffs on his wrists, but didn't reply, to stop her or encourage her. She took it as a resigned sign; not good. He couldn't just give up! "*He'll die!* He's going to *die*, you bastards, TAKE THEM OFF!"

The security was getting noticeably edgy now, probably because of how loud her voice was getting. "Come on, now—" Her own guard tried to placate her, but she just took another step backward, pushing against his chest. She shoved him back as hard as he could, which was evidently only enough to make him take his own step backward. "Stop that!"

"Take it off, *take it off of him!*" she snarled, turning to face him instead of Kabuto. "Take them off, or so help me, I'll kill you!" Hinata was already trying to gather chakra into her hands, but her own shackles were just eating it up.

The man narrowed his eyes, and grabbed her shoulders. "Shut up, now!" he snapped, and tried to force her back into the open cell.

"No! No, I won't, not until you take off those damn shackles! He's going to *die* because of you—mmpf!" Another hand clamped over her mouth; another guard had arrived. She felt something prick her bare arm, and swore again mentally. *No, they're drugging me, that's not good*, she thought frantically, and instead moved her remaining chakra into her arm where it was going numb.

And with that, Hinata was thrown into her new cell, landing on the cold concrete on her numbed arm. She sleepily looked up at the ceiling. Her pathetic amount of chakra couldn't even slow the sedative's progress through her bloodstream. She would probably be in a stupor, if not fully asleep, for a good few minutes. Hopefully they hadn't wanted to fully knock her out. But they wouldn't, not if they wanted to interrogate her... because surely Ibiki would know she'd be the weakest link...

Hinata hated shinobi. Especially Konoha-nin.

-.-.-

Hyuuga Hanabi took a deep breath, and released it in a silent exhale. Beside her, her father stared stoically ahead. They marched in silence down the prison corridor, and Hanabi tried to resist curiosity and didn't activate her Byakugan. No telling who would be in these rooms, but her sister

was somewhere here.

Hiashi was coming to see Ibiki about the matter of his eldest daughter. Hanabi had already been named the official heir, about six months after Hinata's disappearance. She had almost thought that her sister had been dead, and she was a little happy that she was still alive.

Not happy that she was captured, but still. Happy that she was still alive.

Hanabi wanted to ask her sister so many questions about the last year. Had she really joined the Akatsuki? Did she know its members? What were they like? How did they let such a weak kunoichi into their ranks? Was Neji with her? What about Sasuke?

But, walking alongside her furious father, Hanabi doubted she'd get to ask her sister such questions. At least not for a long, long time, after she'd been released from prison.

"Hanabi, wait here. I'm going to talk to Morino-san alone."

"Yes, father." she replied dutifully, still looking around at the drab, cold concrete and lack of proper lighting. In a way, this place was very exciting. The whole war was. It even had a bit of a romantic thrill about it. How many other genin could say that they had been in the Konoha prison during wartime?

Oh well, curiosity overcame her willpower. Hanabi activated her Byakugan, looking around at all of the chakras. Near the edges, she could see someone in maximum security, and several more people in less secure cells. Almost all of them had chakra-draining shackles on them, which would of course cut down on a lot of escape attempts.

But then, something caught her eye. Hanabi turned unconsciously, tilting her head to one side. She recognized that signature—it was Hinata! She was just one hallway over. A lot closer than Hanabi would have imagined.

Curiosity was a terrible, terrible thing.

Hanabi slid over to the other side of the hallway, and looked around for her father. He was down another hall, having an escalating shouting match with who she assumed was Morino Ibiki. He looked creepy, anyway.

The dark-haired genin took a few steps towards the nearest intersection of hallways. If she would have thought it believable, she probably would have been whistling innocently. Her own sister... after over a year, she was so close. Were all of the rumors about her true?

Hanabi turned the corner, and walked down the hallway towards the next intersection, looking for all the world like she was just wandering slightly while she waited. *Technically*, she was. She just wanted to see her sister, too... a quick visit, that was all. She'd be back before her father even stopped shouting at the edges of her vision.

Turning off the Byakugan for now, Hanabi eagerly scampered towards the door on the corner. That was Hinata's. The locking jutsu on it wasn't very complicated, just time consuming. After a few frustrating minutes, she just overloaded it by forcing her own chakra into it to overbalance the physical lock. It clicked open satisfactorily.

Hanabi quietly and cautiously opened the door, and peeked inside.

Hinata was laying on the floor, her head propped up on one arm, eyes closed lightly. She could have been sleeping. But as Hanabi took a step forward to fully open the door and come inside, one

white eye slid open to regard her.

Immediately, her older sister sat up, a bit glassy-eyed but still looking alert. "Ha... Hanabi?" Disbelief made her voice thick. Maybe she had been sleeping, after all.

Hanabi smiled, and hastily opened the door and closed it softly behind her, keeping it unlocked. "...Hi, onee-san."

"Hanabi-chan, you... you shouldn't be in here." Hinata blearily rubbed at her eyes, shaking her head slightly. "...*What* are you doing in here?"

"I-I wanted to see my big sister." Suddenly, it hit the young girl that this might actually get her in some serious trouble. But it wasn't like she was helping Hinata to escape... "And I wanted to see how you were doing..."

"You've grown," Hinata commented diplomatically, nodding at her. Hanabi smiled. "Are you a genin now?"

"Yes. I have my own team and everything. Sensei's great, too, but father doesn't like him much..." she said, almost smug. "But... onee-san. Is it true?"

"Mm, is what true?" Hanabi could see that her sister was on guard now, overly cautious. Hinata looked away, pretending to study the far wall. The younger of the two took the opportunity to study the sibling she hadn't seen for over a year.

Her hair was longer than it had been, and it fell loosely around her shoulders. Her white eyes were the same as always, if a bit sleepy-looking, though there were dark rings around her eyes. From make-up or insomnia, however, Hanabi couldn't tell. Unfortunately, her clothes had already been confiscated aside from her undergarments, so Hanabi couldn't see if she had an Akatsuki uniform. She felt a bit disappointed, oddly enough.

"Are... Are you in the Akatsuki, onee-san?" Hanabi felt like she had to whisper. While it wasn't a good group of ninja, the Akatsuki demanded a certain amount of respect.

Hinata smiled, but it wasn't a happy one. "No. ...Of course not. Hanabi-chan, you know I'm not strong enough to get in." she replied ruefully, returning her gaze to her sister. "Is Konoha really thinking such silly things about me now?"

"N-No, some kid on another genin team thought that..." she admitted, feeling even more disappointed. It would have been cool if Hinata had been a member. "So, uh, why are you..." What did she want to end that sentence with?

"The man who kidnapped me? He's a member." Hinata replied to the unasked question. "I sometimes live in the Akatsuki tower with him, and he's very kind and sweet. Very strong, too. One of the strongest shinobi I know."

"Oh." *That* was cool, at least. Her big sister was friends with an Akatsuki member. "Oh, father will probably want to know if Neji-niisan was with you."

"He is—but he should be back with the Ame forces." Hinata replied curtly. "...Hanabi-chan, you shouldn't be in here."

"I know, but father is still arguing with Morino-san," quickly, Hanabi reactivated her Byakugan just to make sure, "and it's not like you'd hurt me, onee-san."

"No, of course not," she said with a firm nod. Then, Hinata smiled, that same soft, warm smile that Hanabi used to see her use with her teammates. "Hanabi-chan, thank you for visiting me."

"O-Of course. I wanted to see how you're doing."

Hinata laughed, and Hanabi realized what a stupid remark that had been. She was in *prison*, for god's sake!

"Well, I'm doing... fine." She trailed off, and appeared to think for a moment. She would glance out of the corner of her eye at her sister once in awhile, and then return to thinking. Hanabi was curious as to what she could be pondering for such an amount of time. "Hanabi-chan... I can't believe I am asking you this, but..."

"I-I'm sorry, onee-san." Hanabi shook her head frantically. "I can't let you out!"

"No! Of course not! I wouldn't dream of asking you to do such a thing." Hinata laughed again, and Hanabi had to feel a bit sorry for her. "No, I was just wondering if you could do me a very large favor."

If it wasn't escape... "What is it?" she asked, both suspicious and cautious. And yet, she couldn't help but feel a little excited.

"As you can tell, they confiscated all my things. I was just wondering... would it be at all possible for you to get my hitai-ate and my necklace back for me? I swear they're not weapons, they just have some sentimental value..." Hinata trailed off again, chuckling slightly. One hand went up to touch her neck, and Hanabi saw a large scar there for the first time. Her eyes widened, and she couldn't help but wonder *how* her sister could have acquired such a thing without dying.

"U-Umm..."

"Of course you wouldn't have to return it to *me* personally, Hanabi-chan!" Hinata continued hastily, shaking her head. "That would get you in trouble. But just, if you have the opportunity, or see father with my things, could you please get those two items for me? The necklace is black, and it has a white pendant on it—"

"If I can't give it back to you, how will you get it?"

-.-.-

Hinata couldn't believe she was asking her sister to do this, but it wasn't only for the sentimental value. She wanted Hanabi out of the village, because she knew that soon the Akatsuki would probably stage another attack. She didn't want her little sister caught in any crossfire, or targeted because of her eyes. Plus, if the Ame forces staged an escape, things could get dangerous for an eleven-year-old girl to be here for.

She wanted her out of Konoha.

And if Hanabi went to Neji, he would keep her out of the way.

"Just... sneak out of the village. Carry a white flag of some sort, and you won't get killed. Find Neji-niisan, he'll protect you from them. Give them to him, alright? He'll keep them for me."

"Are you saying that you're going to break out of prison sometime soon?" Hanabi asked seriously, almost looking like she'd want to see such a thing. Which was why Hinata wanted her out of the way; her younger sister would find it too much fun to stick around and watch.

"P-Possibly. And even if I don't, I'd at least like someone to have them who can value them." She smiled disarmingly, something she'd seen Deidara do many times. Hanabi relaxed a little, nodding uncertainly.

"Oh... right." Then, she lowered her voice to a whisper again, and leaned in, "B-But... what if a scout picks me up and delivers me to the Akatsuki?" Hanabi seemed to have some kind of notion of the Akatsuki being an all-powerful group who ruled Ame with an iron fist. Maybe she was just romanticizing the group a *little* too much.

"If that happens, just say Bya-chan sent you. Find the blonde one, if you can. But just say that Bya-chan sent you, and they won't harm a hair on your head, alright, Hanabi-chan?" That would work. Hopefully. Deidara wouldn't do anything, but she didn't exactly know about some of the other members... still, she wanted Hanabi *out* of the village when the inevitable retaliation came.

Hanabi departed soon after that, after a single hug between sisters. Then Hinata was left alone.

She soon found out why, however, her sister had left so quickly. Her father came into the cell, and that snapped her completely awake. All traces of the drug was gone, and Hinata could only stare in slight shock as he walked stiffly over towards her.

Suddenly, Hinata didn't feel all that brave.

"I don't see why he only needed three people, yeah."

"Leader-sama's plans usually work out."

"But still. *Three* people to get into the village prison? Maximum security, yeah? Ha!"

"Deidara, you are acting like I *care*." Sasori replied flatly. His blonde partner continued complaining, regardless.

"I still think I should have gone in, yeah. I could have just bombed half the village, draw them away, and then swoop in and rescue Bya-chan. And maybe Kabuto and Itachi and whoever that other guy was, yeah."

"Do you remember that Iwa jounin who thought that Leader-sama killed Orochimaru?"

"Yeah? What about him?"

"That's the fourth captive." Sasori replied calmly.

"Oh. ... Well then, he can rot in prison for all I care, yeah." Deidara replied snottily, crossing his arms. The bird below them gave an agitated shiver, making it duck in the sky slightly. Sasori hastily grabbed the nearest thing—Deidara—and waited for the bird to stabilize. Gods, he *hated* flying on an animated piece of mud. He didn't see how Deidara had managed to con him into doing

it this time.

"*Please* don't do that. You need to learn to control your birds better." he snapped, kicking one of the wings for good measure. "It's bad enough you're flying on goddamn *clay*, Deidara, but you don't have to make it convulse every time you get angry or surprised."

"Huh?" Deidara looked down in surprise at his clay, and the bird's tail swished angrily behind them. Obviously he'd never noticed this before. Actually, it'd probably be more accurate to state that he'd never *cared* to notice this link. "Really, Sasori-danna, it's not so much that there's an actual *connection* between that and my birds, yeah. You should know—in all of your supposed years of being a shinobi—that jutsus can get strained and even disrupted by emotions. This is just a milder form of that, yeah." he explained, with an air of someone who wasn't aware that he was explaining something.

Sasori looked at his partner with a blank face, completely blindsided by both the implied insult and Deidara's sudden impulse to display his genius that he usually hid so well.

"Now please let go of me; I'm trying to watch, yeah." The Iwa-nin elbowed the shorter ninja away, and continued to lean over the edge of the clay feathers to watch Konoha, though he admittedly did so with a very red face.

-.-.-

Ibiki was hearing things. Surely he was. Because there was no way in hell that a lone Akatsuki member was doing what he thought he was doing.

But he was.

The interrogator hastily went through his files again. The white-haired one, his file was... lacking, to say the least. His name was Hidan, and he appeared to have some sort of immortality jutsu in effect upon his body. He wielded a large, three-bladed sickle as a weapon of choice, and his partner was the powerhouse of the two. Not exactly a wealth of information.

It had taken seven men to properly restrain him. Ibiki rubbed at his jaw; he had been one of them. He'd gotten clipped by that scythe of his, too, though luckily it wasn't poisoned or a particularly deep wound. Hidan had just kept his eyes trained on him the entire time he was being dragged into his cell, grinning maniacally. Evilly might have been a better word to describe it, though.

He didn't get it. Morino Ibiki, who was prized and even feared for his ability to completely dissect the human mind, didn't understand what Hidan was trying to do when he stormed Konohagakure on his own, screaming like a banshee something about 'Jashin'. The name rang a vague bell, but beyond that, Ibiki didn't have a clue as to who it was supposed to be. They didn't have anyone named Jashin in their prison.

So the first thing he did when he walked into the Akatsuki member's cell was ask, "Who the hell is Jashin?"

"Jashin-*sama* is a god!" Hidan shouted, wriggling valiantly against his bonds. The lights illuminated him harshly, throwing his shadow in sharp relief against the wall behind him. It also washed out his skin and hair more than was needed; they made his eyes glow almost as red as Itachi's had been. "Jashin-sama is my fucking god, you godless heathen! You now have two

Jashinists in your stupid hellhole of a prison—you're damned! Your soul is fucking damned!"
Hidan then began cackling hysterically, throwing his head back as far as his restraints would allow.

So this was a member of some obscure religion. Who was the other Jashinist, then? Itachi? He didn't exactly seem the religious type... but neither did Yakushi or the other captured shinobi. (And the Hyuuga girl sure as hell wouldn't join such a thing.)

Ibiki rubbed at his jaw again. The wound stung slightly from the salt from his sweaty hands, but otherwise that simple injury was the best this Akatsuki member could do. "Why did you come alone?" His shinobi mind was screaming *trap* at the top of its lungs, but he just didn't quite see how it was possible. He'd gotten himself captured, his weapons had all been confiscated, and he didn't have enough chakra to light a candle.

"Who is the other Jashinist?" It would be fun to learn more about this religion of his, to use it later. Ibiki clasped his hands behind his back, smirking in the mere thought of using such a weapon against a shinobi. It wasn't often that you met a devout ninja, especially one as zealous as this man.

"Oh, a damn convert. Not exactly great shit for Jashin-sama, but converts are always welcomed with open arms and all that shit. Still, I ain't complaining, especially when she was converted in such a beautifully and suitably bloody way."

Ibiki filed away many things into his brain from that monologue. The first was that Hidan liked to talk. The second was that he was a fellow sadist. And the third was that Hyuuga Hinata *had* to be the other convert that he spoke of, though he'd never pegged the girl as having a harmful bone in her body. He made a mental note to step up the security around her cell when Hiashi finally left her.

"A suitably bloody way." Ibiki repeated tonelessly. "Sounds like your, ah, religion is quite... interesting."

"Interesting my ass! Jashin-sama knows of your kind; you fucking heathens! He will feast on your fucking souls!" the albino howled, though except for his mouth, he was completely still. "You will go straight to hell, and you will burn for-fucking-ever!"

"Oh really." Ibiki couldn't help but lean in, smiling thinly. "I've done a lot of stuff in my life, and I highly doubt that imprisoning you would make the list of the worst."

That was the interrogator's first and final mistake.

Hidan leaned in as far as his bonds would allow. Ibiki reared back, just a split second too late; the Akatsuki member was too fast, he opened his mouth and—*licked* him.

"You... sick freak." Ibiki was still on guard, though now safely out of range of Hidan's tongue. He didn't know what that accomplished; had he been meaning to bite him? To make sure that there wasn't anything amiss, he rubbed his cheek. Even with an open wound there, still oozing a little bit of blood, Hidan hadn't been able to do something.

Maybe the Akatsuki was overrated.

Hidan just smiled complacently at him, licking his lips. He left a small smear of blood—Ibiki's blood. Ibiki made a note to never convert to Jashinism. The Akatsuki member watched him, almost with a guarded expression, and tapped his foot on the stone below him. (Unlike Itachi, they didn't have time or a cell prepared for another Akatsuki member. They'd just tied him up, gave him some shackles, and hung him from the ceiling with his toes just barely scuffing the floor.)

"Go to hell," Hidan said after a long pause, and his smile widened into a large grin. Or actually, it was more like he was just baring his teeth at the interrogator.

That was when Ibiki noticed the circle that had been drawn below Hidan, in the Jashinist's own blood. The special jounin managed to take a grand total of two steps as Hidan completed the last three slashes through the circle, forming a triangle.

His skin melted into black, with white, bone-like markings on him. Ibiki barely had time to take that in, as well as let out a bitten-off curse, when Hidan shouted, "Now!"

His shadow stepped off of the wall, and the color faded out into spiked, orange hair and many black piercings. That was all Ibiki saw before the figure thrust its hand through *Hidan's* chest, slowly pulling the heart out.

Ibiki felt blood rise in his throat, and he collapsed with nothing more than a soft gurgle.

Dropping the still-beating heart, Pein remarked, "I'll have to thank Jiraiya-sensei for that technique some day. It's quite handy, but I've never had the opportunity to use it before..."

"Hey, while you're off in your fucking shithole childhood, mind getting me down from here?" Hidan grouched, aiming a kick backward. The leader smoothly sidestepped it, and instead turned to the door, which was still closed and locked.

"Tobi," Pein said simply.

With a wave of his arm, Tobi stepped out of the air, planting his fists on his hips without a word.

"Go find Itachi."

--.-

The Hyuuga clan was prized on their mastery over chakra flow. They could focus it in their hands, their feet, even in harder places like the very tips of their fingers or their backs. More than one Hyuuga's life had been saved thanks to a screen of chakra covering their backsides.

So when Hyuuga Hinata, barely standing and barely conscious, saw the opportunity she needed for escape, she took it.

Because, after all, chakra-draining shackles are useless if they can't get the chakra into the hands.

She had pushed half of her remaining chakra into her feet, and brought her wrists down them. She simultaneously stood up and stepped on the chain with the force of her chakra behind it. The result was shattered metal links, as well as a shattered chakra-draining jutsu. She didn't have much left now, but at least her remaining chakra was hers and hers alone.

Her father had just closed the door, and Hinata had yet to hear the locks on it from the guards. She supposed that her father was talking to them, or maybe even bribing them to keep it a secret that a Hyuuga was in prison in the first place.

Hinata felt dizzy, but she just shook her head and tried to clear her mind of all of the things her father had said to her. She tiptoed over towards the door, still listening for the locks, and forming

signs with her hands. The shackles themselves, without a chain or a jutsu on them, were now just no more than pretty (if heavy) bracelets. At least, without the chain, they were silent.

Taking a deep breath, Hinata reached out and yanked on the metal door. She opened it to a very surprised guard and her very surprised father. "Hi—" That was all he got out before she hit him with a *Kaihou Omoi*. The fear inducing one.

When both men were reduced to half-conscious, trembling masses, Hinata couldn't help but think that that was revenge for all of the years of how Hiashi had made her feel. Just to be sure, she leaned down so that she was eye-level with them both. Both ninja shrunk away from her, eyes wide and unfocused.

"I'm sorry," she whispered thickly, still reeling a bit from all that had happened. Her head hurt, and that didn't exactly inspire much more sympathy from her for her father. With a quick chop to the neck, she had both of them unconscious.

Of course, unconscious guards weren't exactly inconspicuous.

Hinata knew she didn't have much time before she'd get captured. After all, she only took down those two because they hadn't been expecting her, and they were both already exhausted from the war so far. She needed to find Itachi. Itachi was strong, and he could kill people by *looking* at them. She couldn't beat a comrade like that.

She tried to activate her Byakugan, but the rush of chakra just made her dizzier and more nauseous. It made her headache worse, too. Shaking her head again and brushing her hair out of her eyes, Hinata decided to rely on normal sight to find the eldest Uchiha. He'd be somewhere heavily guarded... but hopefully that would also make it easier to find. If she just rationed her chakra and maybe took out a few of the guards with long-range genjutsu, maybe she could slip past them with a *Houtteoko Onore* in the resulting chaos...

As predicted, Itachi's cell wasn't that hard to find.

Hinata peeked cautiously around the corner at them. Four guards, all sporting ANBU masks. They looked tired, but they also stood tall and were unmistakably ANBU-ranked. At the very least. They could even be jounin. The only thing that was stopping her from being discovered was the distance between them and her ignore me jutsu.

Hinata was just forming hand signs when there was a shout at the other end of the hall. It sounded like a lot of gibberish, probably in code. The ex-heiress peeked around the corner again, and saw two of the ANBU departing after a third, looking as angry as masked people could look. Something must have happened. Was there another attack on Konoha? Were the Akatsuki retaliating?

At any rate, it only left two ANBU for her to take care of.

Taking another breath to steel herself, Hinata resumed her seals. If there were two, she could perhaps take them both out and then break into Itachi's cell... they would already be exhausted, of course, and unsuspecting (as far as she knew). Maybe with a bit of luck she'd pull this off.

"*Kaihou Omoi: Okoru no jutsu*," she whispered, and hastily leaned around the corner again to gesture with the final sign towards the intended victim.

The ANBU she had been targeting had just knelt down to adjust his sandal. Hinata felt scandalized, but then she noticed that her chakra was still fueling it. It must have hit the second ANBU. But nothing happened, for a long time.

Then, finally, much to the kunoichi's relief, the fox-masked ninja spoke up. "You know what? This is a really stupid assignment."

"Huh?"

"I mean, why the fuck should we be guarding Uchiha Itachi, of all people?! The goddamn *Hokage* should be down here talking to him! Not just leaving him to rot in this cell doing absolutely *nothing*."

Hinata couldn't suppress a smile; the anger-boosting genjutsu had worked.

The ANBU member got more and more riled up, with his partner completely nonplussed by the situation. It ended up with the angry one running off, presumably to see Morino Ibiki about this assignment. The second one looked around nervously for a moment, and then with a shout followed suit.

Hinata breathed a sigh of relief, clapping happily. "Oh gods..." She had never been more nervous about casting a jutsu in her life, and finally something paid off. Walking unsteadily down the hall, she looked around for any sign of security jutsus or seals, but could find any.

The locks weren't even that difficult to release. Several of them she could pick open, and others she had the strength to actually break. Konoha must be pretty busy if this was the best they could come up with...

Then she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Hinata swore—she seemed to be doing that a lot today—and threw open the door. She closed it behind her, and found herself in Itachi's cell.

He was in maximum security, she knew that. And he hadn't exactly been welcomed back to Konoha with open arms, she knew that as well. But she had never seen her genjutsu teacher look more... defeated.

Itachi was blindfolded, head lolling to one side as if he was sleeping. Or unconscious. Like her, he'd been stripped down to undergarments, but unlike her, he was held upward by his hands in a kneeling position, unable to even get the comfort of leaning against the wall, like she had.

But the most horrifying thing was the state his body was in.

There were bruises and cuts covering his body, and there was even enough for a few tiny pools of blood below him. A rib was sticking out of his chest, dripping blood. His lip was split, and there was even blood soaking his blindfold. One leg appeared to be broken, based on the angle it lay in. His hair hung limply around his shoulders, some of it cut in ragged locks, the black hairs floating idly in the pools of blood and sweat below. One arm had been cut open nearly to the bone, and then the wound was cauterized, though it looked like it had been burned with nothing more than a red-hot kunai.

His lips were stubbornly closed, and he raised his head slightly when she'd closed the door. Hinata took a few steps toward him, completely appalled at what Konoha had done to its own.

"...Hinata." Itachi stated hoarsely. He probably recognized her footfalls.

"My god..." she whispered, still approaching him at a slow pace. She couldn't bring herself to walk to him any faster.

"Is Leader-sama here?" he asked. His voice was completely devoid of pain and all other emotions. Even hope.

"N-No... it was j-just me..." Hinata felt like crying, seeing the state he was in. It was horrible. Obviously he hadn't divulged any secrets, or maybe someone had just did this to him for revenge. Or even *fun*. She felt sick, and her throbbing head and dizziness wasn't helping matters. If she'd had any food in her stomach, she probably would have emptied it right then.

"..." Itachi turned his head, and then finally let it rest on his shoulder again tiredly. He didn't seem entirely pleased that his rescue came in the sole form of the meek Hyuuga girl. "...You took out the guards?"

"Yes. With genjutsu."

"Good."

Then, behind her, there was a high, feminine shout. Footsteps stomped by, and someone hit the door with a metallic thump. Itachi's head perked up again, and Hinata hastened over to him. She wanted to hug him, but his injuries probably wouldn't like that. (Hell, *he* wouldn't like that.) "H-Hold on, I'll untie you." She had to stand on tiptoe to reach the top of his shackles, but she succeeded in snapping the chain connecting them like she had hers.

And that was the end of her chakra.

Itachi rubbed at his wrists after they dropped down. The way his arms hung limply, one might have thought that the manacles were made of lead. Without taking the blindfold off, he reached down and untied his feet, running one hand lightly over his broken leg with a sort of sigh.

Hinata grabbed his uninjured shoulder, and hauled him up to his feet. He leaned on her, so ignoring her own weakness, she put his arm over her shoulders, and half-led, half dragged him towards the door. With his other arm, Itachi reached up and slowly untied the blindfold.

When his Sharingan were released again, his mouth twisted into a faint, but demonic, smirk.

The door opened before they reached it. Hinata and Itachi both froze, eyes wide. Neither of them could fight like this.

But apparently the door opening was accidental; Tobi tumbled in. It looked like he had been leaning on the door without knowing it was unlocked. "...Oh, hi!" The masked-ninja waved at them, hastily getting back up. Outside, there was a spreading puddle of blood, and bloody footprints leading to where Tobi was standing now. "You guys might want to run now. Tsunade is dead. The Leaf peoples aren't exactly happy about that..."

"To-Tobi-chan, wh-why are you here?" Hinata gulped, completely unable to process this. Was this a rescue attempt? Then, crazily, her only thought past that was, *I hope Hanabi made it out safely*.

"Is Leader-sama here?"

"Yeah, yeah. Leader-sama and Hidan-san went off to look for *you*, actually. Hidan-san had Kabuto with him, too. Leader-sama's causing panic behind him, so it shouldn't be that hard to sneak out..." Hinata sagged in relief at hearing that Kabuto made it out safely as well, but then Itachi grunted at her for moving so suddenly.

"Let's go, then."

"You don't look too well." Tobi commented tactlessly. Itachi gave him a pointed glare, and the masked shinobi took it as a sign of farewell. "Ahh—I'm gonna go see how everyone else is doing..." With that, he completely vanished.

Hinata shifted Itachi, pulling him up a bit higher on her shoulder. He made an angry little sound for it, and she felt him wince slightly. Obviously he was in bad shape if he was actually *expressing* himself. Hopefully Kabuto wouldn't be too bad off, and he could heal him once they got back out to Ame...

"Let's go, Itachi-senpai."

-.-.-

Deidara had been looking for revenge, yes, when he first spotted the young Hyuuga girl. But when she just held out an unmarked Konoha hitai-ate—she wasn't wearing one—with a necklace tied onto the end and said, "Bya-chan said to give this to the blonde Akatsuki member," Deidara's motives suddenly changed.

The young girl formally introduced herself as Hyuuga Hanabi, Hinata's younger sister. Sasori obviously looked like he wanted to murder her, but Deidara stood protectively between them. Literally. The blonde helped her onto his bird, and he shuttled her over to where Konan was presiding over the remaining Akatsuki forces.

"Hey, we have a Hyuuga here, yeah," he shouted as they landed, and picked Hanabi up by the back of the shirt. She gave a squawk of protest, that was quickly cut off when she caught sight of Kakuzu and Kisame. (They would be enough to shut anyone up.) "She has these." He held up Hinata's headband and necklace, watching Konan tilt her head to the side.

"...So?" the pregnant woman asked dully.

Midori, however, took over from that point. Hanabi looked a little bewildered at the sudden surge of attention, but the cinnamon-haired girl just took her hand and led her gently in the direction of the other prisoners. Willing or not, Hanabi would now be a prisoner, even if she was bearing such gifts.

"I don't know why Bya-chan sent her out here, yeah," Deidara said irritably, pacing back and forth in front of his bird.

"Obviously she's related to Hinata-hime. I'd say a little sister. She probably wanted her out of the fighting."

"Maybe she wanted to turn her over to Neji," Daisuke remarked innocently, tapping his fingers on the hilt of his sword. "I can see Hinata-chan doing that. Hanabi is a nice girl, if a bit excitable. Hinata-chan would want her out of the way so she didn't run off into a fight and get herself killed."

"So Bya-chan is still in the prison?" Deidara stopped momentarily in his pacing, looking at Daisuke shrewdly. "The prison that Leader-sama went to 'liberate' and still isn't back yet, yeah?"

"That would be the one, Deidara," Konan said dryly, crossing her arms. "Now sit down. I don't want you an airborne target anymore. Just *wait*."

Daisuke was then summoned to Midori, again, who was still escorting Hanabi towards the prisoners. Hanabi was taking it all in with large eyes. She stopped, however, when she caught sight of the captives—and who was guarding them.

Neji's matching white eyes widened slightly when she caught sight of her, and he slowly stood up. Midori happily returned the young Hyuuga to him, watching with dull, green eyes at their unexpected reunion.

Hanabi bowed from the waist, and murmured, "Neji-niisan."

"...Hanabi. What are you *doing* here?" he asked quietly, glancing momentarily at the Rain Lord and her bodyguard. Daisuke shrugged in response.

"Onee-san told me to give these to you." Obediently, she offered the headband and necklace, almost looking glad to do so. "And then told me to stay with you. She wanted me out of the fighting, and she seems to think that you can keep me safe."

One of the prisoners groaned quietly at this exchange. Hanabi obviously recognized Aburame Shino, as she paused and bowed again in his direction, mumbling, "Shino-san. Haven't seen you in awhile, either..."

"So Hinata decided to dump her little sister with us?" Midori asked skeptically. "To supposedly keep her *safe*?"

"Would you want your little sister in the very place that three Akatsuki members—including the leader—were attacking?" Daisuke responded for them, grinning at the blush and rapid head shake he received.

That was when things went to hell in a hand basket.

Cries went up that Sasuke and his team had been spotted again, this time heading to the Konoha gates. Half of the Ame forces were watching when he was turned away by Jiraiya, and he angrily shouted, for the world to hear, "If you don't release Itachi to me, I am going to come in there and get him! No goddamn village is going to stand in my way!"

The Akatsuki members looked at each other with sly smirks. So Sasuke was still as much of a wildcard as ever, but this time it was working in *their* favor. He could definitely cause quite the distraction...

Unfortunately, Daisuke could become just as much of a distraction as Sasuke.

He was halfway across the battlefield before anyone besides Midori noticed. She was following along behind him, shouting and trying to drag him back. He ignored her. "Someone stop him!" Konan shouted angrily, scowling.

When there was an explosion in the direction of the Konoha prison, however, the blunette decided to let things stay as they were. Jiraiya quickly disappeared from the gates, and Sasuke had been intercepted by Daisuke. The two immediately got caught up in a loud argument, and Konan realized how good of a distraction that would be for the younger Uchiha. If Sasuke was busy fighting while Itachi was being sprung, it'd be better than perfect.

Tobi materialized out of the air next to Konan, and she didn't bat an eye. Several of the other members jumped, however. "Hidan-san killed Tsunade; I doubt they'll be happy about that. Leader-sama is getting everyone out now."

"Right. Deidara—I want you to cover them from above. Bomb anyone who isn't ours."

Eager to finally do something, the blonde hopped onto his bird and soared off.

"Zetsu, go over to the edge of the forest near the weak spot in the wall we discussed earlier. I want you to keep an eye on how things are progressing."

"Will do."

"Alright, the rest of you, listen up!" Konan now addressed the Ame forces as a whole. They were severely depleted and most of them were injured. Which was why Pein crafted the next part in his plan. "Jounin, I want you at the front! I'll need one jounin and four chuunin to guard the captives, but everyone else, assume your battlefield positions, but hold them until the sign is given by an Akatsuki member! Defensive and long-range jutsus only! We are wrapping this up now, men!"

A resounding "yes!" filled the man-made clearing.

"Kisame, your job is to go get Itachi and bring him back here for a crash course in healing. I just want him battle-ready, nevermind long-term effects. We can fix those later." She dropped her voice again, this time addressing only Akatsuki members. The Kiri-nin nodded, glancing back at the village. "Sasori, Kakuzu, I want that tower *destroyed*. The Kyuubi will survive, but I have a feeling that every warding and sealing jutsu known to man is on the Hokage tower."

"Yes ma'am." Kakuzu replied snippily, crossing his arms. Obviously he didn't think it would be that difficult to break. "So I take it we're going ahead with the invasion plan?"

"Yes. Pick up Deidara, too, when he gets back. Pein will be busy with Jiraiya, and I'm *unfortunately* out of the fighting." It would be hard to miss the bitterness in her voice. Absently, she ran a hand over her swollen belly. "Zetsu and Tobi are going to keep an eye on the Konoha-nin. Hopefully Daisuke can keep Sasuke busy, but if not, I want whoever is free to keep him busy. Itachi is going after the Kyuubi, not his baby brother."

--.-

Things seemed to be happening too quickly to properly adjust to the situation. One moment, Hinata had been trying to keep Itachi conscious, and the next she and the Uchiha both were on Deidara's clay bird, gliding back towards the Ame side of the war. Deidara was talking away happily, but Hinata couldn't do anything but tune him out. Itachi had collapsed, and while he was still awake, he seemed to be fighting to do so.

Below them, there was a rainbow of fighting. Pein had taken on Jiraiya again, and seemed to be using multiple bodies to do so. Hinata spotted Kakashi running off of the battlefield, back towards the village. Kabuto was nowhere in sight. Hidan was hacking a path through the carnage towards the village again as well, and she could see both Kakuzu and Sasori streaking towards another part of the wall to invade the village. The mass of the Ame army was staying back in their camp, but the Akatsuki seemed like more than a match for the Konoha-nin below.

Hinata rolled off of the bird even before it had properly landed. For a moment, she swayed on her feet, and she could feel herself almost faint. But then, the bird landed beside her with a swoosh of wings, and she was helping Itachi off of it, too busy to even think about how tired she felt. Her eyelids were heavy and her head was pounding, but she could only think about how she was batted aside by Kisame, who picked up his partner in a bear hug.

"Kisame—my ribs. Broken—ow." Itachi grunted, and Kisame immediately set him back down.

The swordsman summoned a medic over—Hinata dimly recognized it as Hanako—and Itachi practically fell down when Kisame's arm left his shoulder. Hinata didn't feel like she was in much better condition, though admittedly she wasn't as beat up as her genjutsu mentor.

"Deidara, *go*." Konan snapped.

Deidara glared at her, and then looked at Hinata. "Sorry—bye, Bya-chan. See you in a bit, yeah." Then he was gone on his bird again, and there were only three Akatsuki members left out of the fighting.

The ex-heiress looked around, but she couldn't spot Kabuto. Then again, he hadn't had a bird to ride on, so he probably wasn't back here yet. She hoped that he was okay...

And then, she felt incredibly light-headed, and the world spun around her. Hinata fell backward, and was dimly aware of someone catching her. She was turned around, her head flopping like a rag doll's, and was then looking up into white eyes like her own.

Neji, accompanied by Hanabi at his elbow. Her younger sister had an astonished look in her eyes. "Hinata-sama. *Hinata*. What's wrong?" he asked seriously, looking more worried than she'd ever seen him before.

Hinata just shook her head. Or rather, she tried to, and then gave up because of the pain in her head. She closed her eyes, and just concentrating on breathing. She felt so *drained*. Which was perfectly understandable. But then she remembered that she was in nothing more than her underwear, and Neji was holding her, and she felt like she was going to pass out, and that wasn't good.

"I-I have to lay down..." She almost added that her head hurt, but that wouldn't have been good, either. Hinata was somewhat proud of herself that she retained the foresight to stop herself from making the situation worse. She was immediately lowered onto the cool grass, and she felt her head placed in Hanabi's lap.

"Onee-san... are you alright? Wh-Where's father?" she asked haltingly, brushing hair out of her sister's eyes. Hinata flinched as though struck. Hanabi blinked in surprise, and Neji knelt down beside her.

Without saying anything, he brushed the bangs off of her forehead, revealing a slash of green that was the Cursed Seal. Hinata stared up at him, and he just looked away. Hanabi was also peering down at her like she'd grown another head, or that she suddenly revealed some horrible disfigurement. Which she might as well have.

"I'm going to kill him." Neji said without preamble.

"N-No...!" Hinata protested, trying to sit up, but her body wouldn't allow it. "I-I'm fine. Really." A blatant lie, but a necessary one regardless. She wouldn't be pitied or avenged. Even she had to admit that it was the logical thing for her father to do; he, as well as every other Konoha-nin, knew that some kind of retaliation was coming, and it would be better safe than sorry.

Plus, she had officially been removed as the heir.

The current heiress was staring down at her with a slightly revolted look in her eyes. Hinata felt a little sorry for her. Hanabi wouldn't be able to come with them; it was much too dangerous. But leaving her in the remains of the Leaf that they'd leave behind? It seemed cruel. Maybe she could take her sister with her, after all...

She could feel her gaze become unfocused as she let her thoughts drift. And then, with no other

conscious thoughts, Hinata drifted off into tranquil unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh snap on a stick! Hinata has the Cursed Seal, and looks like she's out of the fighting. Pein's plan has been pulled off flawlessly-thus far. What will happen when he finally tries to go after the Kyuubi itself? Naruto is already in Kyuubi-mode, sprouting tails left and right. Itachi's in no condition to fight a Jinchuuriki...right?

Pein's Plan Part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While they were in Konoha, might as well move to finally capture the Kyuubi. That had been Pein's plan all along. The prison would provide a suitable distraction, and then it was just a hop, skip and a jump to the Hokage's tower where the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki was locked away.

The only problem, really, was Itachi. *He* was the one who was supposed to capture the Kyuubi. It had been assigned to him—or rather, he'd volunteered for it. Probably because he wanted the only Konoha Jinchuuriki.

Pein hadn't expected his injuries to be as bad as they were.

But planning ahead, he'd decided that since this village actually *liked* their weapon, he might as well let most of his Akatsuki help out. Because there would need to be distractions, and at least Kage-level seals guarding that tower. He'd sent Kakuzu and Sasori ahead to try to break them. Or at least weaken them, at which Deidara should arrive and blow half the tower up. That ought to break most of the jutsus.

But it had to be Itachi who finally captured it.

Which was nearly impossible; his injuries were too severe. Even with a medic healing him—it wasn't even Kabuto, who hadn't returned yet—he could barely stand. It might fall to another member to secure the Kyuubi, and if that happened, Pein didn't know quite what he should do. Punish Itachi? Punish whoever intervened? Just rejoice because there wasn't any more Jinchuuriki hunting?

It was amazing what went through the mind of a god on a rampage.

So to distract himself, the ginger-haired man started counting off who they'd killed. Tsunade would top the list. Hidan had caught her in his *Chimatsuri* jutsu, and her hemophobia had taken it from there. Sarutobi Asuma was also dead, by Tobi's hands. Maito Gai was dead from his own sacrifice. (Granted he nearly took Kisame with him.)

Pein only got that far, however, when his own diversion came. Jiraiya stood in his way, about two rooftops ahead of him. They'd been fighting on and off during the whole fiasco, but judging from the look in his old teacher's eyes, he knew that this would be the last fight. He also knew that Jiraiya knew Tsunade was dead.

Tobi looked back at him questioningly when he stopped. "Go on ahead. Keep the assault on the tower constant. I'll take care of sensei." Pein told him, nodding towards the tower.

"Yeah, Leader-sama." Tobi saluted smartly and darted off.

Pein turned to face Jiraiya, silently calling in his remaining bodies. Jiraiya had already killed two, annoyingly enough. He'd make sure that those would be all.

"Goddamn it! Why won't this thing fucking break?!" Kakuzu roared, throwing his shoulder against the door again. Between him and Sasori, they'd managed to break the weakest, the wards around the entire building. Now they were trying to enter said building.

"There's more wards on it." Sasori replied flatly, knocking on one of the walls. It sounded like it was made of concrete, though it was obviously only wood. Rather thin wood, at that. "It will be useless to attack it from the ground up. There will only be more jutsus and wards as we continue up. The fastest way would be to go through the roof straight into the Hokage's office."

"No—this is a matter of pride now." Kakuzu sniffed in reply, and tried tackling the door again. Even with his massive strength, the wood didn't even shiver. It only demonstrated how sturdy the wards were.

"Whatever. I'm going up. You have fun down here." Sasori raised his arm, the cable from his stomach shooting out of the sleeve and wrapping around the railing by the Hokage's office. She had large, glass windows; it would stand to reason that glass would be much easier to break than wood. As the redhead pulled himself onto the balcony, however, he was frightened out of his skin.

Not actually scared, mind you, but it was the closest he'd come to fear in a long, long time.

Two empty, yellow-ish eyes peered out at him from the window, the thing's face not three inches from the glass. Four—no, *five*—tails lashed behind it angrily, and that was what gave it away for him. Sasori stared in shock at the Kyuubi's container. The demon's chakra was leaking; at this rate, they might have to fight the *Bijuu*, not the Jinchuuriki.

Itachi wouldn't be able to handle this.

The thing—it had a vaguely humanoid skeletal shape, still, even if it crouched down on all fours—was growing another tail even as Sasori stared at it. A ragged, sharp-looking mouth twisted up into a grin that sent a shiver down Sasori's artificial spine. Its dark fur rose around its hackles, and its tails were bristling with both chakra and anger.

They had let this get too far out of hand.

"Sasori—oh my god!" Tobi jumped right up onto the railing, only to nearly fall off again when he saw the Jinchuuriki. "What *is* that?!"

"The Kyuubi Jinchuuriki. Its chakra has been leaking more than we anticipated. We have to hurry if we don't want to be fighting the Kyuubi itself." Sasori replied without turning from the window. Tobi nodded shakily.

"Y-Yeah. But Leader-sama is busy fighting his old sensei, so we're pretty much on our own."

"...Great." he deadpanned, taking a step backward as the sixth tail fully formed itself. "Well, get someone here—speak of the devil."

With a few overly loud flaps of clay wings, Deidara landed his bird on the roof, both bird and artist leaning over the edge to stare at the thing that was inside the tower. Sasori and Tobi both looked up at him expectantly. He just blinked, and then looked down at his partner. "That doesn't look like him when I fought him, yeah."

"The Kyuubi is breaking free. We have to subdue him quickly, though."

"Don't we have to get *in* to get him, though?" Tobi chirped, pointedly looking away from where the Jinchuuriki was grinning at him.

"That's where Deidara comes in." Sasori gestured to him, and then jumped back onto the railing. "Have at it."

"I'm supposed to let that thing *out*, yeah?" he asked skeptically, looking back and forth between the Suna-nin and the Konoha-nin. "No one's gonna be able to stop it."

The forming Kyuubi growled silently—apparently the jutsus also blocked sound—and swung its tails against the glass. It didn't crack. The three Akatsuki members watched this with some kind of morbid amusement. "It's either now, you break him out and we stand a chance of surprise or hurting him, or he gets out on his own and then rips our throats out at his leisure. Of course, he can rip out *my* throat all he wants and I won't care—but you two wouldn't be so lucky, now would you?"

"Ah... yeah." Tobi said dejectedly, hanging his head and rubbing his throat in appreciation. "So, Deidara-san is going to blow up the tower, right?"

"He should be."

"Thanks for the choice in the matter, yeah." Deidara stood up, momentarily blocked from their view by the overhang. Then he jumped down beside them, and called his already-formed bird down to sit on the railing. It looked absurd, three Akatsuki members and an oversized bird all perched on the same railing, but looks were the least of their concern right then.

"You two gonna sit there, or move? I personally don't care, but—" The other two vanished without any more words spoken. Deidara smirked, and jumped out onto the nearest roof, shouting, "*Katsu!*"

Below, still by the door, Kakuzu looked up in annoyance. "Bastard." Sasori nodded in agreement.

"At least he does his job." Tobi pointed out with a shrug.

Zetsu appeared out of the ground beside him, making his partner jump slightly. "Konan has ordered us to hurry the hell up. Leader-sama is busy with Jiraiya, so we—"

"We know," the other three chorused.

"The only problem is," Sasori continued, "that the Kyuubi is breaking free."

"Hey!" Deidara shouted, drawing their attention. Four of them looked up, and instead of the debris and half-conscious Jinchuuriki they expected, the tower was completely unharmed. And Deidara appeared to be throwing a tantrum because of it. He threw what appeared to be a cuckoo at the building, and it exploded upon contact. Still no visible damage. Now fuming, the blonde used both hands to create a fist-sized *dragon*, of all things, and with a savage grin, made it larger with a hand sign. It was now roughly the size of the building he was standing on.

With a silent roar, the dragon hopped over onto the tower. It was long enough to wrap itself completely around the top of it, which it did.

"You idiot, Leader-sama said to capture him, not kill him!" Sasori shouted. The other three had already vanished, out of the area. With no more warning than his partner's yell, the redhead also ran for cover.

When the smoke cleared from the massive explosion, half of the buildings in the area were leveled.

The tower alone was still standing. Sasori looked around for Deidara, but the blonde artist wasn't gone. Probably vaporized in the explosion.

But then, looking up, the puppeteer saw a blonde head perched up on the railing again. Scowling, Sasori jumped up to join him.

Deidara was looking at the glass, a small, disbelieving smile on his lips. Sasori looked at that almost nervously, and then looked at the glass.

There was a long, vertical crack, running from floor to ceiling and branching out in a few places.

Behind it, the Jinchuuriki was looking at it with an expression that mirrored Deidara's, though the blonde at least looked human when he did.

-.-.-

They're actually getting through, was Naruto's only thought. For the past few days, he'd been cooped up in this tower, just getting steadily angrier. And pacing. There had been a lot of pacing.

By the second day, he was actually listening to the Kyuubi.

It had started out as little whispers in his ear, but by now, their roles were practically reversed. Naruto felt as if he could *only* whisper, that the Kyuubi was the one in control. He practically was. Six tails? He remembered something about Jiraiya saying how bad *four* were. Six couldn't be good.

But all the same, Naruto could just barely see through the red haze of his anger. And all he saw was a long crack in the glass in front of him, and black cloaks. Black cloaks with red clouds.

He'd been trying this whole time to get out of here, to go help with the war. But he just couldn't get out. But now there was a *crack*.

With a roar, he threw himself at the glass, and felt it melting slightly under the force of his chakra-fueled fur. The wards were down.

This was nothing but glass now. (Of course, it was reinforced glass, but still. The wards and protective jutsus were all but gone.)

The Akatsuki members—it was like they didn't have faces, they were all just the same, they were all just *Akatsuki*—realized that at the same time, and one of them disappeared. Just vanished. Naruto didn't even care if it was a cowardly move.

There were still two, and one of them seemed to be trying to pull the other off of the balcony. Naruto snarled at them, but they ignored him. How dare they ignore him! He whipped his tails around and tried to shatter the glass, but he only made another crack. At least it was progress.

Then there were two more Akatsuki members on the other side of the glass. A tall one and a short one. The two from before disappeared. Naruto glowered at them both, trying to recognize which ones they were. Tsunade had briefed him just before she locked him in, just in case.

Black hair, red eyes. Blue hair and yellow eyes. That was... Uchiha. Uchiha Itachi and his partner.

The second name escaped him for the moment, but only because he knew about Uchiha Itachi. Sasuke's older brother, the one he'd been chasing after all these years.

Naruto felt even angrier, and he felt more than heard the Kyuubi laugh at him. *Yes, yes, aren't you angry at them? Itachi is the reason Sasuke tried to leave you. Itachi is Akatsuki. Look at everything the Akatsuki has done to you. Kidnapped Hinata, killed Gaara, and how many more of your friends are dead out on the battlefield?* the Kyuubi nearly purred.

"No..." Naruto hissed, gritting his teeth together. He shut his eyes, and tried to shake his head. But the Kyuubi kept him stationary, and he could feel another tail growing. It was like a release—all of this built up chakra and rage, finally finding a way to get out of his body. Plus it made him feel so *strong*. He felt like he could rip these Akatsuki shinobi apart with his bare hands. Tear their throats out with his teeth. Naruto licked his lips, digging his claws into the charred carpet below him.

Itachi turned and said something to his partner, but kept his red eyes on Naruto. He couldn't hear them, but he did hear a few muffled words. The wards were breaking down.

He swung his seven tails against the glass again, cracking it further. A few tiny pieces fell down onto the carpet, and both Akatsuki members watched this silently. Naruto just kept hammering away at the glass, each time bringing more bits and pieces down on the ground and cracking more of it.

Soon enough, the two Akatsuki shinobi were facing down an eight-tailed demon behind a spider web of cracked glass.

Yes, good. Break the glass, and then break their bones. You want to get them back for everything they've cost you, don't you? the Kyuubi asked softly, pulling back its black lips to reveal fangs. *You're so close, boy... don't falter now...*

He paused to scratch his ear with a hind leg, and then charged again to headbutt the glass. This time, it even made a cracking *sound*. One more strike would shatter it.

Naruto wasn't even Naruto anymore. The Kyuubi was directing his actions, his movements, his thoughts... the saddest part was that Naruto *realized* this. But he also realized that he needed the fox's power to destroy the Akatsuki and protect Konoha. It was almost a twisted kind of self-sacrifice.

With that in mind, Naruto rammed against the glass one last time, and it splintered all around him, raining shards that reflected the equally broken scene like mirrors. Itachi and his partner simultaneously jumped back in opposite directions to avoid the initial strike. Naruto was now on the balcony, ignoring the falling glass, sniffing the air and turning his head slowly, tails lashing.

He was free.

-.-.-

Pein had his hands full. No, that was an understatement. He had enough on his plate to have all six of his remaining hands full.

He also couldn't believe that *three* of his bodies were totaled. It was pathetic, really, but he'd severely underestimated Jiraiya. That and the fact that he was busy trying to keep an eye on the Kyuubi's rampage kept him at his wit's end trying to fend off his former teacher. It was getting a bit

ridiculous.

In fact, this whole war was ridiculous. He'd planned on using his troops more as fodder and diversion than anything else, and at least that part worked out. But he hadn't planned on the Kyuubi fighting for itself all that much.

Especially not chasing Itachi all through the village with eight tails.

Pein ducked under a kick, more on reflex than actual thought. Jiraiya nailed him with a punch to the jaw, however, that knocked loose a few of his piercings. He'd be feeling that tomorrow morning. Time to wrap things up quickly.

"Tobi! To—" Jiraiya cut him off with a kunai to the throat, and the shadow clone dissipated with a puff of smoke. Pein swung down from the eaves of the nearest building, using the last Sannin as his perch momentarily. Kicking down, he sent Jiraiya's head into the dirt, and jumped up onto the roof again. "*Madara, go get the Kyuubi!*"

It was the first time using Madara's name so blatantly, but he didn't have *time* for this, goddamn it. He needed to concentrate on killing Jiraiya, and the Kyuubi thing was getting out of hand. He saw the masked ninja give him a severe look, and then vanished. Hopefully in the direction of the last Jinchuuriki.

Jiraiya had picked himself up, and was looking at his student with an unreadable expression. Obviously he'd heard him use Madara's name, but Pein shrugged it off. There was no way that he knew enough about their situation to be a threat. Plus... he was going to die today.

Jiraiya looked away.

Maybe he knew that, too.

Itachi was only keeping ahead of him because of the constant genjutsus he was throwing behind him. Kisame had long since disappeared, trying to track down Samehada. (It was with Suigetsu, but they didn't know where *he* was.) Samehada could potentially drain some of this chakra away.

Naruto was already growing his final tail.

Itachi had never been one for cursing, but he couldn't help but swear under his breath as he ducked and rolled under two of the deadly tails. He circled around Naruto, running in the opposite direction, throwing up a camouflaging illusion behind him.

He had just enough chakra for a *Tsukuyomi*. But he didn't even know if that would work. The Kyuubi had a positively monstrous amount of chakra, and that alone could disrupt it. And if it didn't, there was always the question of *who* Itachi would find himself locked in his mind for the next seventy-two hours with. Naruto or the Kyuubi. If it was Naruto, there would be no problem, and the fight would end then and there.

But if it was the fox, then the fight would still end then and there. Just not with favorable results.

Moreover, if the genjutsu didn't work, Itachi wouldn't have any energy left for any more genjutsu,

or even regular jutsu. He would die, simple as that.

Itachi felt the disturbance in the air before Naruto did. Tobi appeared out of thin air, as usual, and turned to face the rampaging demon. He was now between said demon and his prey, not a very fun place to be. Itachi turned to look over his shoulder, and saw Tobi slide his mask partially off.

The Kyuubi Jinchuuriki stopped dead in his tracks, his blank eyes widening.

Itachi's pride was severely wounded. Even if the facts told him that he couldn't possibly hope to contend with a nine-tailed Jinchuuriki, it still stung to know that the leader had called in Tobi to finish this quickly. The Uchiha stopped as well, and turned to watch more fully. Might as well see if Tobi really could curb the beast.

Naruto shrunk back like a frightened animal. Tobi took a step forward, and said something in a low voice that was not at all like the one he normally used under this persona. Itachi narrowed his eyes slightly.

And just like that, the dark, chakra-based fur around the boy's body melted away, dissipating into the air. The sudden rise in the area's chakra was enough to make Itachi's skin crawl. All nine tails liquefied as if acid had been poured on them. The chakra dripped off of Naruto's body, leaving a dead-eyed boy in its stead.

Tobi slid his mask back onto his face, and half-turned to look at Itachi. Giving him a thumbs-up, he said, "All yours."

Itachi had usually been much too neutral to really hate someone, all his life he'd been like that. But he'd never hated someone more than he hated Uchiha Madara right then.

-.-.-

It looked as if each time Pein called his forces back, it got messier. More hasty, less organized. This time didn't even *deserve* to be called a proper retreat.

The second Itachi informed Pein (rather stiffly) of the Kyuubi's incapacitation, he had ordered a fall back to the Rain.

Predictably, Konoha was less than delighted with both its Hokage and next best thing, the other Sannin, dead. All of the ninja still standing swarmed out of the village, Konoha- and Ame-nin alike. The latter running for their lives. The Kyuubi was delivered to Zetsu, who was told to high-tail it back to Amegakure. He did so.

Then the race began.

It wasn't so much a forced march as a flat-out sprint. Just as they were entering back into the Konoha forest itself, Pein had to shout, "*Run like hell!*" if he wanted to save any of his remaining troops. At least half of them had already been dead on or off the battlefield.

It was a dog-eat-dog world out there, after all. At least anyone left behind would slow down the opposition. Some rather zealous loyalists preferred to stay behind, hold back as many as the advancing enemy as they could. The leader made a mental note to make a memorial for all of the good men he lost.

He and Konan passed Deidara and Neji, who were trying to get a still unconscious Hinata onto a bird as quickly as possible. Soon after that, however, the bird's shadow passed overhead and soared on ahead of most of the masses. Checking in with his other two remaining bodies, Pein hastily checked on the rest of his Akatsuki.

Zetsu was already gone with the Jinchuuriki. Deidara would probably be the first to arrive back in the village. Kisame and Itachi were coming along at a sedate pace, the Kiri-nin occasionally helping his injured partner keep up. Hidan and Kakuzu were far in the front, racing each other back out of the Land of Fire. Most of his forces were traveling in a crowd—as much as shinobi could.

Then Pein noticed something.

...Shit. Sasori and Tobi were missing.

-.-.-

The shattered Leaf army stopped pursuing them at the Fire border. The Ame-nin gratefully threw themselves back into the torrent of rain, and then hurried home. They made the journey in a little over a day.

Most of them collapsed at the very gates, both from exhaustion and sheer joy. Families and genin swarmed out of the village, coming to help and hug and cry along with the battle torn troops. Women ran out and threw themselves at their husbands and lovers, genin tackled their jounin teachers, and there were the lost-looking souls who didn't find who they were looking for and instead stood there in the rain, giving the impression of being like ghosts. There seemed to be a lot of those ghosts.

None of the four shinobi who preceded their arrival came out to meet them.

And Tobi and Sasori were still missing-in-action. Pein had a hunch that they were together, though where, he couldn't even begin to guess. Surely they wouldn't have been stupid enough to stay in Konoha. But he had no idea why they would have chosen to abandon Amegakure at such a time. More importantly, time was of the essence, and he couldn't afford to either wait for them or go ahead with the sealing without them. They needed to return *now*.

Two days later, they did.

Pein stood at the gates, their only welcome. He just stared down at both of them, silently asking where the hell they'd been.

"Kabuto is dead." This first sentence didn't exactly answer his question, but it did give rise to the annoying little detail that meant he had to appoint a new commander of his surviving medic faction. Pein narrowed his eyes, and Sasori continued in a dead tone. "Sunagakure and Kirigakure are both mobilizing their forces. Konoha is also gathering its remaining shinobi. Suna and Konoha will probably arrive at the same time—in three days. Kiri will take at least another four."

Pein shook his head slightly. Sasori closed his eyes, looking incredibly tired. Tobi stood silently beside him in the pouring rain, standing at attention. Pein could barely make out the red of the Sharingan from his eyehole. "Go get to the tower, get some sleep. We're starting the sealing tomorrow."

"Yes." The redhead walked past him into the village, dragging his feet.

Pein turned to stare at Tobi. The black-haired ninja shrugged. "It really was quite interesting. He had to go bury Kabuto—with the Copy-Nin. They spoke about something, I didn't hear. Danzou's been named the new Hokage, too."

"Great." He knew *of* Danzou, though he didn't personally know the man. He knew that he was a war hawk, and his actions were harsh and precise. Probably the best move Konoha could make, considering the circumstances.

Tobi turned to look in the direction of the tower. "Itachi isn't pleased that I had to capture the Jinchuuriki."

"Itachi will have to deal with that. I'm more concerned about what will happen to my village if we can't be here directly to protect it." Pein gestured uselessly with one hand, and then turned and accompanied Tobi into the village. "Might as well take advantage of the time before the attack. Itachi's still recovering, but most of the others are back to full health. Deidara has been absolutely infuriating, though—hopefully Sasori will be able to finally put a leash on that personality of his."

"How many of our forces died?" Tobi asked, not one for distractions.

Pein sighed. "Over half. Closer to two-thirds..."

"And will we be able to defend the village for the necessary time? Sealing the last demon will take almost two weeks."

"We have two days before anyone will get here in any large numbers. Otherwise, they're going to have to. I'll give a speech tomorrow about it... rally them and all that..."

"Right. We'll see how that goes."

"I guess we will. Either way, we're too close to lose now. If they actually manage to storm the sealing area, half of us will just have to break off and defend. Or—I'll make doubles of us. I'm not sure. I'll think of something."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The war in Konoha has been wrapped up, but it seems as if the battle is moving itself to Ame! How will the Akatsuki defend their village while sealing the demon at the same time? What will happen if they can't? What do the other two major villages think of this war...? And Itachi isn't too happy with Madara right now, is he?

A Village Prepares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pein awoke in a cold sweat. He immediately rubbed his hand over his face, feeling the lack of piercings and blood. Just sweat, nothing but that... sweat didn't hurt a body, after all...

He looked over at Konan, who was still sleeping peacefully beside him. He exhaled slowly, wiping his brow. What a horrible dream... no, nightmare. It had been such a horrific war, and then the Bijuu attacking... Like most dreams, the details were fading away into the night as he thought about it. But one thing remained stubbornly in his mind. The eyes of the demon he'd captured.

Pein flopped back down on his pillow, and then a moment later irritably flipped it to the cool side. He kicked the covers off, careful not to disturb Konan, and spent most of the rest of the night tossing and turning.

Sometime before dawn, Konan awoke screaming. This immediately had Pein fully awake again, and his first thought was that someone was stupid enough to attack them.

His second was fear for the baby.

Then, as she gradually calmed down and shakily laughed, he realized that she'd had a nightmare as well. "Did you dream about your demon?" he asked solemnly.

She just rubbed at her eyes, smearing the makeup that she'd been too tired to take off. "Mm, it was nothing..." In other words, it *was* about the demon she'd captured. Coincidence? Post-war stress or trauma? "Go back to sleep, Pein..."

"No, I think I'm going to get up. You go back to sleep. Today's the day, and I want everyone to be well rested." Meaning today was the day that they'd seal the Kyuubi.

After Tobi and Sasori finally reappeared and giving them a day to recuperate, it was finally time. They couldn't afford to wait any longer. Today was the day that they'd finish off the sealing. No more demons after this. No doubt they'd get totally smashed afterward (hell, half the village would)—Pein absently made a mental note not to let Konan drink—but for now, there was nothing but stress.

"No, I'll get up now, too. We'll see if anyone else is awake..." Yawning, Konan stretched for a moment, before climbing out of bed as well. She pulled on Pein's uniform easily, as if it belonged to her now. It might as well have. Pein was stuck with an extra of his again, and she *still* seemed cool towards him. Probably still angry about the whole not allowing her to fight in the war thing...

--.-

"Deidara, what are you doing?" Sasori was standing in the open doorway to the bathroom, rubbing at his eyes. He looked more tired than usual, but then again, he always looked tired. It was his perpetual expression. Maybe he wasn't tired, after all. Deidara turned and looked at him over his shoulder, shrugged, and then turned back to the mirror.

"Brushing my teeth." It didn't seem very mature to say that he'd gotten woken up from a nightmare and was too scared to go back to sleep. He saw Sasori, in the mirror, look at him, and then looked down at his hands. Okay, so he was brushing the teeth on his hands. It wasn't *that* weird. "If they're clean, then they work faster, yeah. I don't see how it's odd enough to warrant the look you just gave me, Sasori-danna."

"...Right." Yawning, Sasori walked into the bathroom, and winced when he saw how messy his hair was. Not that you could tell, with how it was regularly, but apparently Sasori thought it was rather disheveled. He started trying to comb it out with his fingers, since he knew Deidara was deathly possessive of his hair brush.

"Were you sleeping?" Deidara had been under the assumption that Sasori didn't sleep. Still, if Sasori could yawn—which was *weird*, considering he didn't *breathe*—then it stood to reason that he could sleep.

"Yes." The blonde opened his mouth to ask the obvious question (*how?*), but Sasori cut him off with a shake of his head. "I just don't sleep as *often* as you do, Deidara. I'm not completely lifeless, you know. I still have a few human functions I've retained that I have to continually perform. Sleeping, mostly."

"But you don't... breathe."

"Breathing requires a respiratory system, idiot."

"B-But—I just saw you *yawn*, yeah!"

Sasori looked guilty. He turned away from his partner, though the mirror made the movement superfluous. "Some human habits are just hard to break. I'm still going through the motions, even if they don't serve their purpose anymore. It's... psychological. You wouldn't understand."

Deidara shrugged, and went back to brushing his teeth. "So..." He looked around innocently, trying to come up with a suitable topic for discussion. Instead, his brain just threw a rather dangerous one out of his mouth. "Where were you these past few days, yeah? Leader-sama was going crazy."

"In Konohagakure. I had a funeral to attend, and then Tobi and I decided to gather information while we were in the area." Surprisingly, the redhead didn't seem annoyed by the question.

"Is that why you came back without a uniform, yeah?" he asked shrewdly. Sasori turned and gave him a sharp look, and Deidara obediently shut up.

"Why are you up at four in the morning?" Despite the murderous look in his muddy brown eyes, Sasori's voice was quite calm.

Deidara avoided eye contact, shrugging again. "Why are *you*?"

"I had a disturbing enough dream to interrupt my sleeping." Okay, so they'd both had nightmares. That was an interesting coincidence. Had someone poisoned their water supply or something? Or maybe it was due to this whole war business. Still, Deidara hardly thought that the Ichibi had anything to do with this war...

"Huh, didn't know puppets could have nightmares, yeah." he replied callously, getting a glass of water from the sink. He eyed it speculatively, seeing if one of Sasori's poisons had accidentally been leaked into it. Sasori made an odd little sound, but aside from that, he didn't respond. Deidara rinsed off his teeth, spitting the water back into the sink, and then stretched languidly. "Well, it

was nice having this stupid conversation with you, Sasori-danna. And it wasn't even about art this time, yeah."

He turned to leave, but he was stopped when Sasori said his name. He said it simply, without inflection, mimicking Itachi's usual voice quite well. Deidara stood in the doorway, his back to his partner. He could make guesses at several reasons Sasori might have stopped him, but even more reasons outweighed his guesses as to why he should have just ignored him. The blonde raised an arm, leaning it on the doorframe, and stared flatly ahead.

He heard Sasori step up behind him. "Why aren't you mad at me?"

Oh, great. A late-night argument just before the final sealing. Just what they both needed. "Should I be mad at you?"

"You seemed mad."

"When, yeah?"

"At the time."

Sasori was being vague. This annoyed Deidara. "The time of what?"

"When this happened." He was yanked backward and turned around simultaneously. And for the second time in his life, Deidara found himself kissing Sasori.

It took a few moments for that simple fact to sink in, but when it did, he was quick to extract himself. Backing up, nearly tripping in his haste, and blushing badly enough to rival Hinata, the explosives artists just shook his head. Firmly. Or, as firmly as he could, which considering the circumstances, wasn't that firm at all.

"So why aren't you angry with me?" Sasori asked mildly, as if they were discussing the weather. Which, taking into account that they lived in Amegakure, was saying something.

"I-I—you have to stop *doing* that!" Deidara didn't like how high his voice sounded. Clearing his throat and giving his head another shake, he added, "I-I don't think something as stupid and immature as a kiss is enough to deserve anger."

"You've gotten angry at smaller things." Sasori pointed out, his lips curling upward into a sly smirk. Deidara blushed harder, though he wasn't quite sure why. "Or are you just telling yourself that because you've kissed Hinata-hime at random several times?"

"Uh—why do you care?! Are you jealous?!" he snapped back, bristling. Why was Sasori always dragging her into things? Was it really as stupid as mere jealousy? The Suna-nin narrowed his eyes a fraction, and then looked away, casually leaning against the doorframe. That was all the answer Deidara needed. Haughtily, he crossed his arms. "I can't believe you, Sasori-danna. Yeah."

"How many other of your personality's tics are voluntary, Deidara?" Sasori had changed the subject. Deidara couldn't believe his ears, much less his partner. "See, without Kabuto to regulate my actions with his smart-ass remarks, there's nothing really to stop me from doing whatever the hell I please anymore."

Is this how he copes? Deidara asked himself, backing up. If Sasori was trying to cope with the loss of Kabuto—Deidara had known they were close, but he'd never guessed that close—and what he was saying was true, he suddenly felt very afraid. Of worse than kissing or for his life, he wasn't sure yet. "Uh, yeah, about that, danna—"

"You're awake because you had a nightmare, aren't you?" Sasori asked suddenly, sharply. He didn't seem nearly as mad as a moment ago, something Deidara took as a good sign.

"Yeah."

"Something's wrong, then." The puppeteer closed his eyes lightly, tilting his head to one side. "I think the Akatsuki has bitten off more than it can chew with trying to put a leash on the Bijuu. All nine of them, no less."

"...*Why* are you even thinking this, yeah?" Deidara blurted out, trying to keep up with Sasori's topics. Clearly his mind was running faster than normal, either that, or Sasori usually thought in rapid, disjointed fragments. Maybe he was just voicing them.

Sasori's eyes reopened, and he stared at his partner intently. "We're all probably going to die because of those damned demons and Leader-sama's pride. I don't particularly find the thought of death attractive, since true art should never die. Moreover, the idea of a mass holocaust against all shinobi by vengeful Bijuu shouldn't be a thing anyone wants."

"...But that's what *we're* doing, yeah."

"That's why—" Sasori cut himself off, biting his bottom lip. "You should probably try to get back to sleep, brat. Falling asleep during a sealing won't look good." He turned to leave, but Deidara wasn't going to go through that again. Oh no. He grabbed Sasori by the shoulders, pulling him back into the bathroom, and then pushed him up against the sink.

"No. Bad danna; you're not doing stupid things like that again, yeah." Then, dropping his voice into a low growl, he asked, "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Doing what?" Sasori asked, looking genuinely clueless. Either that, or he could put on as good of a façade as Kabuto.

"This. All—this. You know, the first time, I thought you only did that to get rid of me for awhile. I hadn't put it past you." Deidara scowled, gritting his teeth. "But... you're being... stupid."

"Stupid how?"

Deidara let go of him, and stepped back. He closed his eyes and put his hands on his temples, sighing. He couldn't believe he was going to have virtually the *same* argument with two different partners. Only now, he was on Hinata's side. "Look, just because we're missing-nin doesn't mean we still have some rules to follow..."

Sasori let out a little chuckle. Or at least, the Iwa-nin *assumed* it was a chuckle. It didn't sound very amused. "Shinobi rule number one—"

"No, not those!" Deidara snapped heatedly. He never had like the shinobi's rules; they were too generalized, too stereotypical. He hated the way they were expected to apply to every single situation flawlessly. Sure, he could understand the basic concept of them as *guidelines*, but too many of his comrades in Iwa had eaten, slept and *breathed* those rules. Deidara was fairly sure Sasori wasn't quite as gung-ho as they had been, but still. The fact that a *missing-nin*, especially Sasori of the Red Sands, was even bothering to recite them was laughable.

The Suna artist stared levelly back at him with blank, if glassy, eyes. He didn't speak. A normal person would have gathered from his expression that Sasori hadn't comprehended a bit of the last few minutes. But a ninja knew better. It was quite the opposite.

Deidara hung his head and shook it. He couldn't help but laugh. "God... sometimes, I really hate you, Sasori. I think we'll continue this conversation when you're mentally capable of it."

-.-.-

When Hinata awoke from her nap, she found Kisho on her chest and that she was leaning on Neji's shoulder. He idly flipped a page in his book, and then glanced down at her. "Awake now?"

She hastily straightened, evicting a meowing Kisho as she did so. "Y-Yes. So—"

"Don't apologize. It wasn't a problem." he said quietly, turning another page in his book. She blushed and looked away at the far wall. Honestly, she hadn't expected the Cursed Seal to be this much of a problem. It seemed as if all she was doing these days was taking naps and trying to combat her nearly constant headaches. Neji had told her that this was because it had been placed on her so late in her life compared to when most other Hyuuga received them. It could take up to a week for her body to properly and fully adjust to it.

She rubbed at it, closing her eyes. If she hadn't felt sorry for the Branch house before, she sure did now. And especially the *children* having the seals placed at them... she really saw how barbaric of a custom it was. If she hadn't been disowned by both clan and village, she would have tried to put a stop to it. Maybe having her sister put under the influence of the seal would influence Hanabi enough for her to do something about it... Hinata really hoped that her little sister was doing alright.

Neji had told her that they'd let her go back to Konoha with the other prisoners of war, during the retreat. Hopefully one of them would have taken care of the new heiress.

"Does it still hurt?" Neji asked. He didn't need to specify what he was speaking of.

Hinata turned and smiled at him, and lied, "No, of course not."

He gave her a skeptical look, but didn't decide to pursue the matter. "Would you like to go out today? It will most likely be our last free day until this war is over."

"Sounds fun to me."

He stood up, closing his book with a soft thump. "I'm going to go take a fast shower. Where would you like to go? Your tea shop?" He had taken to calling her favorite tea shop hers.

She just kept smiling, and nodded. "If you want to, Neji-kun." He bobbed his head back in her general direction, and then left her alone in the living room.

Once he was out of sight, Hinata flopped back down onto the couch, sighing regretfully. Kisho stared up at her from the floor, his large, green eyes unblinking. "Oh, Kisho, all I seem to do is worry people," she lamented flatly, closing her eyes again. It helped the headache, a little. Mostly she had gotten used to the dull, constant pain, though whenever she stood up suddenly, she'd get very dizzy. "I wonder if Kabuto-kun could do anything for this..."

Kisho made an odd noise. Hinata looked down at him, laughing. The cat glared balefully back up at her.

"Was that supposed to be a sneeze, kitty?" She scratched him under the chin to win his favor back, and he purred, forgiving her. "Hmm... I haven't seen Kabuto-kun since we got back. Oh! I hope he hasn't been injured. I wonder if I could get Neji-niisan to let me go visit him..."

Kisho meowed in response, flicking the tip of his tail back and forth like a pendulum.

Hinata continued her one-sided conversation with the feline, occasionally reaching down to scratch him behind his black ears. "You know... I think it's this rain." Kisho blinked at her, so she elaborated, "This rain, it's so dreary. It's not good for morale or moods. It makes people... sad, I suppose."

The grey cat gave her a flat look. He probably would have raised an eyebrow, if he had one.

"I-I mean, maybe I'm just missing Konoha again. Already. It's just... Neji-niisan and I... we're just... I don't know. Deidara-kun was so worried about Sasori, and we're drifting apart, anyway. I think the rain is forcing us apart. It sounds terrible to say this, but I wish we got sent on a mission. Just the two of us, like it was in the beginning. I miss hanging out with him like I used to."

She continued to reminisce, mostly verbally, in odd little disorderly phrases that only matched her thoughts. Kisho was probably lost, even if he was half asleep, due to her constant petting. Pretty soon, he gave up trying to listen, and just curled up and drifted off into a catnap.

Hinata herself was only slightly surprised that she missed Deidara as much as she did. He was her best friend, her dragon. He could cheer anyone up, and he was always so energetic and lively. She really hoped that when this whole last battle blew over, they could go on a mission together. Just the two of them. Hopefully Neji—and Sasori—would get along fine without them in their absence...

She must have fell asleep again, because the next thing she knew, she was being pawed awake. Kisho was poking her repeatedly in the shoulder with his paw, and then stuck his cold, wet nose on her cheek, which really woke her up. She looked up in time to see Neji giving the cat a disapproving glance. "Oh! I-I'm so sorry! I must have drifted off again. Sorry...!"

"It's alright. If you're tired, you should be asleep anyway." he replied with a shrug. Then, the brunette looked down at the cat, who was still prodding Hinata quite persistently. "I think he wanted you awake, though."

Hinata smiled. "Apparently." Then, getting up with a stretch, she picked her cat up. "Are you hungry, baby?"

"Yes, I am." Neji replied with a smirk. Hinata blushed and gave him a mock pout.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"So the cat is more important than I am?" He returned it with his own. "I see how it is. I simply do not know how I am going to compete with Kisho—obviously he owns more of your heart than I do."

She was now rapidly approaching flustered, and just turned away from him. "Y-You're insufferable. At least Deidara-kun never flirted this much."

"I was making an observation. I don't flirt." he said solemnly, and if it wasn't for the circumstances, she might have believed him.

When she finally calmed down and he finally quit flirting, they decided to actually act upon their

plans from before. It was much later than she had thought, but the lights of the city reflecting off of the clouds above bathed everything in a soft, orange glow. The rain had nearly stopped, and instead a light, misty drizzle fell. It was actually quite nice out, considering they were in Amegakure.

Their dinner was interrupted, however, when the storeowner kicked out most of his customers, several of them with a broom. Hinata was more than surprised at this, but Neji just kept her seated at their table. When the owner got to them, he took one look at their white eyes, and decided to just take a step backward. "S-Sir, ma'am, you have to go now. Pein-sama is giving a speech, and he needs his population there to hear. I-I heard it's very important."

"We will listen to what Leader-sama has to say after we are done with our meal. Is that understood?" Neji replied quietly.

They were hastily left alone in the restaurant.

"I-I think we should go see what that is about... I mean... if everyone needs to hear, surely we have to as shinobi?" Hinata asked nervously, fidgeting.

He gave her a flat, rather dangerous, look. "...You seem to be under the impression that you're going to be fighting sometime soon, Hinata-sama."

She colored and looked forcefully away. "If Ame is going to be invaded, I would think that I would have to. Moreover, if you're fighting, then I am."

"Your body is still adjusting to the seal. You're not in top condition."

"I don't have to be in the middle of it, like I was last time. I can just stay in the tower with Midori-chan and Daisuke and cast long-range genjutsu."

Even Neji had to admit that that was the most practical course of action. He'd known that she had taken out several ANBU with her genjutsu skills, and he couldn't *honestly* expect her to stay out of the war when it was in their own village! Plus with Daisuke and Midori, at least, they were both probably around jounin-level. It was the best protection she could get, considering that the Akatsuki were going to have to pull a disappearing act to seal the Kyuubi.

Hinata bit her lip, and gave her mind a mental shake or two. She was *not* going to think that. Her mind wasn't even going to *stray* to Naruto. From what she'd heard, he had practically turned *into* the Kyuubi during the siege, though for some reason, that didn't help her nearly forgotten infatuation with the boy.

"The last time I told you to stay with someone, you wound up in prison." the brunette said flatly, crossing his arms. Their food was rather neglected by now, but that didn't particularly matter. It seemed like they were arguing more and more often...

"*Staying with Kabuto-kun*, like you told me." she retorted primly. "I really don't think I'm that incapable of a fighter, anyway. With our losses and the Akatsuki gone, then—"

Neji smiled indulgently, and she just narrowed her eyes. "No, it's not that I doubt your fighting ability, you know that, Hinata." At least he wasn't resorting to the -sama honorific again. "It's just... My first and only job is to protect you. I forfeited the rest of my responsibilities when I defected from the village, in order to protect you. Now we've both wound up in Amegakure, and I'm not going to let another village stand in the way of that duty I have to you. I think you have yet to realize that."

"Then why are you even going to defend the village with everyone else?" she asked with her best

scowl. Which, really, wasn't that great. Hyuuga Hinata was just not built for scowling.

"To protect you. As I just stated."

He had given up on the destiny talk—mostly—and now he was stubborn in a whole new way. Lovely. Hinata pushed back her chair and stood up, refusing to look at him. "I think I am going to go see what Leader-sama's speech is about. Village-hopper or not, I want to feel like I'm part of this one, and I want to show my support for it. Like any loyal citizen should."

"After you," he replied, infuriatingly calm. Hinata turned on her heel and marched out of the restaurant, scarcely waiting for him to keep up.

Just outside, they could hear a far-off commotion, and a muffled voice.

She waited a pause, under the façade of trying to listen, for him. He just came up beside her, and silently reached down to hold her hand. She didn't say anything, either, but let him try to apologize.

"Let's go."

-.-.-

Pein appeared to be listing off names from a large scroll, though he scarcely looked at it. The pair came in just as he was finishing it, or at least if he was going by surnames. (He was on W.) Neji looked casually around him. Not many of the patrons were dressed fully in black, so it was unlikely that they knew ahead of time that this would be a mock funeral. Or, more accurate, a mass funeral.

The leader of the Akatsuki stood on a large platform just in front of the tower, his members standing behind him. They didn't look particularly sad or melancholic; they looked more *tired* than anything. Itachi actually seemed to be sleeping on his feet. Konan kept running her hands nervously over her bulge of a belly, and Hidan's lips were moving; he was probably saying Jashinist prayers for the dearly departed. That wasn't an attractive thought.

Many of the shinobi in the crowd before him, however, were crying. There were probably more tears than raindrops. No one was sobbing, or weeping aloud, however, since they were all too enthralled by Pein's speech and listing of the casualties of the first half of the war. The sorrow and fear were nearly palpable. They were all silently asking how many more names they would have to add to that list before they could finally live in peace.

Neji recognized one or two names, having been sent on missions with the ninja. Mostly, however, he seemed to mirror the Akatsuki. A vaguely sad sense of apathy. Hinata, however, was standing at attention, raptly listening to the ginger-haired man. Neji continued scanning the crowd. A few seemed to be as tearless as he, including Daisuke, at the far end of the platform. He was leaning on Midori's shoulder, either trying to stay awake, or trying not to cry. It was hard to tell. The Rain Lord was also struggling not to cry, though she was at least having a valiant battle.

Then both Hyuuga heard a name that they *definitely* recognized. "Yakushi Kabuto."

Hinata made an odd little noise, like she had just choked on her breath. Or a sob. Neji reactively put an arm around her shoulders, and stonily listened to the rest of the names, just to make sure that there were no more nasty surprises.

Pein wrapped it up poignantly, saying something about how Ame thanked these brave men and women for their service, and that their lives were cut too short, and other things to please the crowd. Then he began with the real speech, it seemed.

"Shinobi of our village, you are all undoubtedly aware of Amegakure's current situation. Konoha, Suna and Kiri are all on their way to destroy us. Annihilate us. Completely eradicate any one of us who has ever called ourselves a ninja. They have continually misunderstood our goal and our motives, and now they are lashing out in ignorance and rage. They do not understand what a great deed we have all done by sealing these eight Bijuu. Soon to be nine!

"We have captured the Kyuubi. We have, in our possession, all nine demons, who have terrorized our world for long enough! We do, however, need to seal this last, ninth, demon. This will take almost two weeks. We are going to start after this speech is completed, so we will have one day to start before our enemies are upon us. I am asking you all now, who have lost sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, to fight for your village once more. Defend yourselves and our village! Defend our way of life and our ideals, our collective nindo!" Pein paused for a long moment, and the crowd held its shared breath.

When he reopened his ringed eyes, they held a calculated, steely determination. His voice dropped in tone, though not volume, and he continued coldly. "Three foreign villages have declared war upon us for trying to fix their past mistakes. The villages of the Leaf, Sand and Mist. And while the Leaf has been decimated, they will still outnumber us alone. We are stronger in spirit and strength, but they have numbers. The Sand and Leaf will arrive here at the same time. The Mist will attack about four days after that. We will have to defend our little village for those two weeks, against three different villages. The Akatsuki cannot help you until after that. Are you all up to that challenge?"

Silence echoed around the square.

Pein stared complacently back at everyone, and the quiet continued. Hinata looked ready to say something, but instead she just closed her mouth again. She looked ready to cry.

So instead, Neji stood up a little taller, and said loudly, "I think I am, sir."

"I am, too!" Another voice answered after a beat.

"Me too, Pein-sama!"

"I've been ready!"

"I'm ready!"

Soon, the crowd was roaring in agreement, and Pein relaxed a little with a wry smile. He glanced over his shoulder at Konan, who nodded back at him with the same tiny smile. The remaining commanders of each ninja faction were finding each other in the mass, and they and other groups started talking eagerly about strategies, jutsus and tactics.

Up on the platform, Midori was wiping her eyes with her sleeve, beaming proudly at everyone. Pein had a similar, if toned-down, grin. Most of the other Akatsuki seemed amused by this reaction.

"As we will be sealing," Pein started again, and immediately a hush fell over the crowd. "The Akatsuki and myself will be busy. I'm placing the Rain Lord," he gestured to Midori, "as the commander of the Ame forces until I am back in action. You will all still stay under the same

commanding officers as previously, though I am appointing Ohira Hanako as the director of our surviving medical faction."

Agreements resonated within the crowd, and Pein nodded encouragingly at them. The chuunin girl who had suddenly gotten promoted was looking around rather pathetically, until she was swept up by two of the other commanders, and included in their plans. Midori also looked a bit blindsided by the upgrade in status, at least until Daisuke whispered something into her ear. She then frowned and hit him on the shoulder, and huffily turned away, most of her surprise forgotten.

The crowd was getting rowdy and loud now, so Neji decided to take his leave. The speech seemed over as well. He looked down at Hinata, and was only mildly surprised to see that she was crying. She noticed his gaze, and hastily smiled weakly. "O-Oh, I'm okay. Just a bit surprised... about Kabuto-kun... I-I'm glad that Hanako-san got promoted, though. Sh-She's a fine medic."

Neji groaned mentally. She'd gotten too attached to another person, and he had wandered off and died. Trauma didn't work well with kunoichi, he'd found. (Trying to ignore the thoughts of Tenten that surfaced when he even thought of any female ninja now.) "Let's go. You should probably just drink some tea and then go take another nap with Kisho."

Hinata nodded, looking around uneasily at the jostling crowd. "Y-Yes..."

They began weaving through the mass of bodies. It was slow progress, but at least it was progress. Or rather, it was progress until Neji got intercepted by his jounin commander. "Hyuuga-san!" The man's eyes darted down to Hinata, and he added uncertainly, "And, erm, Hyuuga-san."

Neji narrowed his eyes a bit, and cocked his head to one side, not saying anything.

The man was apparently used to this style of response, for he continued on blithely. "I'd like to discuss some of the strategies we're trying to decide upon. They're pretty sketchy, mind you, but I think we could make a lot of them work, and with a bit of planning, we could hold off those Leaf and Sand bastards for a few days—"

"Excuse me, but I have to escort the lady home." Neji interrupted smoothly, nodding towards Hinata. She averted her eyes, blushing lightly.

"She's a shinobi, too, isn't she? You know, we can't afford not to make use of any of the kunoichi in this village, so she will have a part in our plans as well. She can come listen! We're going to need all of the help we can get."

Neji could see that he wasn't going to get out of this easily, but he wasn't going to let Hinata go while she was crying. If this was going to become a battle of wills, this man didn't stand a chance.

But luckily for his commander, another ninja intercepted the trio at that time. One that outranked all of them. Deidara slid out from the crowd as stealthily as only a shinobi could, and was standing behind Hinata before any of them could do so much as jump. "Hey, Bya-chan, I—" It turned out to be him who jumped when he saw Hinata crying. She squeaked, and then hastily ran her sleeve across her eyes. "Why are you crying, yeah?" His voice dropped a few decibels and he leaned in closely. Neji shifted uncomfortably. Obviously Deidara *still* didn't grasp the concept of personal space. At least around Hinata.

She was obviously going to lie, and to say that it was nothing, or that she wasn't even crying. But somehow, she just couldn't say it. She just stood there and stared at Deidara, and slowly, she broke down. "Ka-Ka-Kabuto-kun i-is d-de-dead!"

The jounin commander looked away, and said quietly, "Can you escort her home before you go to the sealing, Deidara-sama? Hyuuga-san and I have things to discuss."

"Uh, yeah, sure," he replied uncertainly, reaching out to awkwardly pat her shoulder. She nearly collapsed at the touch, falling against his chest and grabbing the front of his uniform with a sob. Deidara bit his lip and looked at Neji for some sort of help. But the brunette gave him a look that very clearly replied 'if you're going to escort her home, then you have to be the one to comfort her'.

So Neji watched Deidara leave with *his* Hinata, who was still sobbing on his shoulder. And he tried to ignore the emotion that was scarily similar to jealousy that he felt just then.

-.-.-

Hinata fell asleep on Neji's couch, curled around Kisho. She wasn't aware of when Deidara left, but she knew that when she awoke again, her headache was gone, and she knew that it wouldn't be back again. As if Kabuto had healed her yet again, transcending even death.

But in a way, he had already done that. He was just *returning* to death, this time. That's why she had found him crying. Hinata at least hoped that he hadn't died violently... Why hadn't she figured it out sooner? They had been back from Konoha for several days now, and she hadn't seen him at all. And she knew that Sasori had been late in returning; what other reason could he have had except it being related to his favorite spy's death? She should have known. Or better yet, she should have protected him better, before they'd gotten thrown in prison...

Why hadn't she been stronger? She could have protected him then. She was learning under *Uchiha Itachi*, for god's sake! She should have picked something up, something that she could have used against Kakashi, or the ANBU... And in fact, it had been her fault that her mentor had gotten captured as well. He'd been trying to protect *her*, after all.

Hinata miserably sniffed, and buried her face in Kisho's fur. He meowed in irritation, but didn't move away from her. "Oh, Kisho-kitty... it's all *my* fault... why can't I get stronger? I-I need to become a better kunoichi f-from now on..."

"Is that what you're crying about? You're a good kunoichi, you know." Hinata sat upright so fast it made her head spin. Daisuke blinked in surprise at the sudden motion. "Did I startle you? Sorry."

"Wh-What are you doing here...?!" she demanded faintly, more surprised than angry to find him here. She immediately looked around for Midori as well, but the green-eyed girl wasn't anywhere to be found.

"Me 'n Midori-chan came to check up on you. She went to get some food for us just a little while ago, but she should be back soon." he said nonchalantly, leaning against the wall behind him. He was completely decked out in his ninja gear, and she realized belatedly that she should probably get ready, too.

"What time is it...?"

"About noon." Daisuke replied with a grin.

It took a moment or two to sink in, but then she jumped off of the couch with a squeak. Kisho yowled in annoyance as he was dumped off of her lap onto the floor. "O-Oh—really?! I haven't

helped at a-all! What's going on in the village? Is there any new information on the enemies?"

"Yes, really. No, you haven't. The village is going crazy and it's pretty fun to see what we've done to ourselves thus far. And yeah, there is." he replied in order, counting the questions off on his fingers to make sure he didn't miss any. "Midori-chan has decided that you're sticking with us, too, just so you know."

"Oh. Okay..." She didn't mention that she had kind of been planning that, anyway, but it was nice to know that she was wanted. Hinata hastily folded the blanket she had been using and ran out of the room to try to find some suitable clothes for a war. ANBU gear wouldn't be of much help this time around; they were defending, not attacking, and moreover, it was pretty much totaled from the last time... She ran a brush through her hair quickly and tied it back, still trying to find some kind of shirt. Daisuke watched her frantic actions with mild interest, until he caught sight of Kisho. He then began trying to coax the cat out from under the couch, though the feline was hissing and growling at him.

"Man, harsh. Even the animals don't like me. ...Speaking of animals, Hinata-chan, you might not want to summon anything any time soon."

Pausing in mid-step, she turned curiously to him. "I-I can't summon anything... but why?"

"We have orders to kill any animals that are seen outside, in case they're summons or spies. So you might want to keep kitty indoors." Daisuke shrugged, still attempting to get Kisho out from under the couch. Giving it up, he stood back up, looking at the shoes she had in her hands. "And you might want to wear some closed-toe sandals..."

"Why?"

He gave her a broad grin, and said mischievously, "Just wait until you see what we've done in the past twelve hours."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Well, what has Ame done to fortify itself? It looks like the invading forces are in for a few nasty surprises. Hinata gets depressed after hearing about Kabuto's death, and it looks like more deaths are bound to happen if the village gets overrun. Daisuke and Midori take over the job of cheering her up, since Neji's busy with the war effort and Deidara's busy with the sealing. But what's this...? Konoha and Suna have a few nasty surprises of their own!

Defenses Go Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Land of Rain had always been riddled with lakes and rivers. That was understandable, because of the constant rain. Amegakure was practically an island as it was; half of it was surrounded by the largest lake in the country, which was several kilometers wide and long. The country was also fairly low-lying, for the most part, though its northwestern border was nothing but sheer cliffs and mountain ranges, which were visible from most other parts of the land. Sometimes, when the lakes flooded from the excessive rains, it seemed more like a sea than anything concerning the land.

And the citizens of Amegakure were going to take full advantage of that.

Utilizing all of the surrounding lakes, it was merely a matter of time and a few Iwa-nin's jutsus before the village was practically an island. They burned the forests on the eastern border of the village, and sunk the ground until it was like some sort of shallow ocean surrounding them. Here and there, a charred tree still stood as a solemn reminder of the great forest that had once stood.

But with the water came numerous advantages.

Such as the fact that there was now *no* place to hide. And due to the Land of Wind's water-starved land and climate, few Suna-nin ever *really* mastered the art of fighting on top of water. Hopefully that would help slightly. The nearest shore was at least two kilometers away, so they had plenty of space between them and any approaching armies.

And, as Hinata stared down at the flat, glassy waters below her from the village wall, she only had one thing to say. "Why is the water black?"

Midori giggled. Rather maliciously. "It's *oil*. It took some doing, but we managed to get practically the whole surface coated in it."

Hinata's jaw *dropped*. She'd heard vague strategies from history's wars concerning lighting rivers and ponds on fire, but nothing of this scale. Moreover, oil had much less viscosity than water, making it more slippery, which would hopefully further annoy those water-deprived Suna-nin. It'd be more of annoyance, but still... if this whole thing caught on fire, it'd take days for anyone to fight their way through it.

Hinata leaned out over the edge of the wall, squinting into the distance. They had left the forest on the far shore still standing. She wondered why that was, but she didn't feel like questioning the Rain Lord, since she seemed to have covered her bases nicely. "Is there anything else we have planned?" she asked, turning over her shoulder.

Midori and Daisuke looked at each other, and then burst out laughing. "You'd be surprised at what desperate shinobi can come up with. Some of this stuff is just *vicious*. It won't be wiping out armies, exactly, but I really don't see how they're going to get near the village any earlier than in a week." he said with a sharp-toothed grin.

Hinata just nodded, and then stared back out at the blackened waters. If there was going to be a siege, it was certainly going to be an interesting one.

Kakashi tapped his fingers on his knee, his cheek leaning on his other hand. He was sitting cross-legged in front of one of the few trees in the area, waiting for his scout to return. The man had been gone nearly an hour now. Surely it didn't take *that* long to scout the area...

He couldn't even read. Ever since Kabuto di—left him, he had lost all appetite for his Icha Icha or other assorted novels of the same dirty variety. Actually, he had lost his appetite for most things in life. When the remaining members of the village council had approached him with the proposition of becoming Hokage, he'd turned them down. He didn't want *more* responsibility right now. He couldn't even save one life; how did they expect him to save a whole goddamn village?!

He was now just the field commander of the Konoha forces. And leader or not, he was stuck here waiting for one lone scout to return with his report of Suna's advancement. They had planned to meet up in Wind territory, near the southern border of Ame. Only he didn't know where the Suna forces were, exactly. Which, of course, was not good.

Kakashi raised his head tiredly when he saw figures appearing in the dusky light, towards his right. One, two, *three* figures. He'd sent out a single scout. Even as he thought of that, though, his mind was giving him the answer. And it was finally a favorable one.

His scout reappeared and gave him a hasty bow. "S-Sorry, sir. I found them, and they insisted that they meet with you to discuss—uh—tactics..."

Kakashi slowly stood up, dusting off his pants. "That's quite alright. Go get some sleep now; we'll probably be moving soon. Tell everyone else that as well."

The scout left as fast as he humanly could, leaving Kakashi alone with the two people he wanted to see most right then. (Well, okay, two of the three people he wanted to see most right then. But he was supposed to be in ninja-mode now.) Gaara inclined his head politely, which was practically bowing at the waist for him. Temari just nodded at him, rubbing at her eyes tiredly.

"How are you both?" Kakashi asked courteously.

The Kazekage sighed minutely, and gestured vaguely to the gourd on his back. Temari translated, "After the... Akatsuki incident in Suna, Gaara's not exactly up to his previous power. He can still fight and he'll still kick ass, but without Shukaku, and combined with how wet this terrain is... his sand is pretty much restrained to what he has on his back."

The Copy-nin nodded. "I see. Regardless, you are both valuable assets to our cause." he replied formally. "...How many ninja do you have?"

"As many as we could spare." Gaara said dryly.

"Just over a hundred," his sister added helpfully.

Kakashi found himself nodding again, and it was as if he couldn't stop. It was a robotic movement, repetitious and boring. Just what he needed. "That's good. We have just under fifty, and that's nearly all of our shinobi in the village. ...Some of them have minor wounds, but I can assure you, they're all in fighting condition."

Gaara nodded back at him, his pale eyes shifting slightly to his left. That was the direction Ame was located. "So... they've captured Naruto, then?"

"Yes. They captured Naruto, and slaughtered over half of our village. We returned the favor... but they have Naruto. They have the Kyuubi."

"They're going to have fortified their village by now." Temari said quietly.

"They've only had a few days. It can't be that bad. The most protection will be around the place where the sealing is taking place."

"If we sneak in during the night, we should have the element of surprise. Waiting for us or not, they're only human. A few cloaking jutsus and cloud cover, and we'll be all but invisible." she said thoughtfully, smirking wryly. Kakashi and her brother both nodded. "Alright, Gaara, time to pay them back for ripping our family apart."

-.-.-

Unbeknownst to the invading forces, this was just what the Ame citizens wanted.

Pein had turned off the rain, as requested, but left the cloud cover up. With no moon or stars, there was very little light. The Ame guards knew exactly where the invaders were coming from, too. The forest they left standing on their southern border, just like they planned. Three kilometers of oil and water were standing between them and the village now.

Now they were just waiting for some sign that they showed up.

"Water looks black at night, water looks black at night..." Midori was whispering to herself, leaning against the wall of the village. It was a mantra that was steadily worming its way through the ranks. That's what a large portion of their protection was based on; surprise with their oily lakes.

Then, they saw it. A far, *far* off splash. All ears still awake turned to the source of the sound, hoping against hope that it wasn't some unfortunate animal. And since no more sound came, they knew. It *had* to be ninja.

Midori silently stood up, and crept over to one of the large crossbows. She reached down and took out an unlit match. "Tell me when." she whispered. Daisuke nodded, and started counting.

A minute would be plenty of time for a group of shinobi to get far out onto the water.

Hinata waited with bated breath as she silently counted along. Would they really fall for this? How many, if any, would it catch in the inferno? How long would it hold up?

All around her, a collective hush fell over the village. Though their enemies still had to be a kilometer or two away, ninja were creeping around noiselessly, waking their sleeping comrades and preparing for one last stand. Hand signs were slowly formed. Thumbs were bitten. Weapons were polished.

Is this really going to work? Can we hold them off for two weeks? The entire village thought as one.

Daisuke held up his hand, and then raised two fingers. Midori lit the match, and the flickering light revealed ice-like eyes. She instinctively cupped her hand around the bare flame, though there

wasn't a breath of wind and there was no way that the enemy would be able to see it. She watched her bodyguard, waiting for the last thirty seconds.

This had to have been the longest minute in Ame's history.

All along the circular wall, matches were likewise lit. There were three other long-range crossbows at the ready. All of them were aimed in the same area. People looked nervously at one another, suppressing a grin or a sob. Hinata slowly exhaled, and then inhaled sharply when Daisuke raised a third finger. Ten seconds left.

Ten...

Nine...

Eight... Amegakure was completely silent. Hinata raised a hand in a seal and activated the Byakugan, ignoring the twinge her Cursed Seal gave her.

Seven...

Six... The village held its collective breath in anticipation for the fight of their lives. One way or another, this war would *definitely* make history.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

...One...

Without a further sound, Daisuke brought his hand back down, and Midori dropped the lit match onto the pile of tinder and charcoal on the arrow's point. It flared up brilliantly, and moments later, three others did the same. Midori stood up fully, peeking over the edge of the wall. She raised a hand, and then pointed to the expanse of black waters below them.

With a single twang, all four crossbows were released, and flaming arrows soared over the walls and into the dark night. Briefly, they illuminated a large force on the water, and the ninja looked up as the arrows soared over top of them. They landed in the forest they had just come from, taking a few minutes to catch. But soon they did, and the previously dried trees caught and were soon merrily burning, backlighting the invading armies.

Not a single spark touched the oil on the water below them.

The shinobi were temporarily thrown into a panic, both from the first shots fired and the fire cutting off their escape route. One or two ninja quickly calmed the group with a few shouts and gestures, and they stood their ground, about halfway in between the two shores.

Even with the forest fire behind them, hazily lighting the scene, no one looked down at what they were standing on. Hinata kept her eyes glued on the forces below them, watching with a morbid, sadistic curiosity that only shinobi could develop. Midori grinned viciously, staring down at them all with her ice-like eyes. They weren't going to escape now. "Now!"

All of the shinobi who knew fire jutsus had been recruited into this move. Suddenly, almost a

dozen ninja jumped up onto the wall, and were just finishing up their hand seals. What seemed like a rain of fire came down from the top of the wall, everything from the most basic of fire jutsus to a large, fiery dragon that hit the water with a roar of flames. Instantly the water was aflame, the fire racing out and expanding in all directions with a speed that surprised even the Ame-nin. The Konoha- and Suna-nin suddenly looked a lot more like panicked genin than highly-trained specialists.

They scattered, going in every direction to try to outrun the fire. The wiser ones made shadow clones, and the even smarter ones merely shut off their chakra and dropped down into the water below (though several of them quickly figured out that the water only came up to their waists and had to find a new escape route). But not everyone had the time or ability to at such an instant. Shouts and screams were barely heard over the roar of the fire below them, and the Rain Lord continued standing on the wall, fists planted on her hips triumphantly. She watched as the entire, oversized moat was soon covered in flickering flames, in addition to the forest still ablaze on the far shore. The clouds above them were bright orange, reflecting the light, bathing the whole area in a warm glow. There wouldn't be any problem seeing anything now.

"We've bought ourselves a good week, at least, men!" Midori shouted over her shoulder, and a weak cheer went up from the crowd strewn around that part of the village. "That oil is going to burn for days..."

Hinata thought she was being overly optimistic about the situation, but one could hope. If the Kirin arrived in four days, like they were scheduled to, then they could probably devise a way to put out the fire. Still, all they had to do was buy time. And four days was still four days.

Midori jumped down from the wall, nearly landing on Daisuke, but he didn't seem to mind. "I bet that really pissed them off. Just wait to see what else we have planned."

"Speaking of such, we have to go ready some of the traps." she said with a sweet smile, grabbing Hinata and Daisuke both by the hand and leading them down the stairs onto the ground. She continued pulling them down the path towards the Akatsuki's tower, which had become their primary base of operations. Unlike Hinata, Midori seemed completely at ease in both a position of power and this war.

-.-.-

"I'm nervous. They should have been here by now, but I don't hear anything." Kakuzu complained. It wasn't as if he particularly cared, or really was nervous. He was just trying to fill the silence. Half the group seemed in a sour mood, and that was beginning to wear on his nerves. If he saw one more furtive glance between partners or hear another yawn, he was going to snap and kill someone.

"Maybe the villagers are actually *doing their job* and are keeping them at bay." Itachi replied. And if the taciturn Uchiha was the one who spoke, things *must* be bad.

"Yeah, well, that'd be a surprise." Hidan said flatly, rolling his eyes.

Pein cleared his throat. The white-haired man hastily snapped his mouth closed, and left the next remark to someone else. Deidara spoke up, leaning forward slightly so he could be see the other hand. "I think they really can do it, yeah. After all, even Midori was able to fight Itachi without dying, and Daisuke did the same with me, and they have Bya-chan, too."

"*Because she's a real asset.*" Zetsu snickered, rolling both yellow eyes.

"I didn't see you taking out the guards posted at my cell and releasing me." replied Itachi coolly. Kakuzu noticed Deidara stand up a bit straighter, looking at the black-haired genjutsu specialist with a new kind of respect. Or as much respect as Deidara could muster up for a non-artist.

"Why are we even talking of this? It's not like we can do anything for the next two weeks. We'll just have to take the situation as it is when we're done." Sasori said flatly, staring listlessly up at the massive figure that was steadily absorbing the Jinchuuriki's chakra into its mouth. His partner stuck his tongue out in his direction, but the redhead didn't even bat an eye. He was probably used to such immaturity, anyway.

"So... changing the subject..." Kisame said loudly, breaking up a rather tense and awkward silence that followed Sasori's grave comment. "I had a really crazy dream about the Bijuu the other night. Probably 'cause of the Kyuubi almost breaking free... right?" The last word almost had a plea in it; several other members had looked at him in slight alarm when he mentioned the dream. Kisame shifted uneasily, suddenly aware of what he might have brought up.

"Why didn't you inform me if you had trouble sleeping, Kisame?" Itachi inquired politely, though his stare was a bit more intense than normal.

"I didn't want to wake you. You needed to recuperate, Itachi-san." the Kiri-nin looked away, frowning.

Itachi continue to stare at him. "I couldn't sleep anyway. So it seems that such worry and thoughtfulness was wasted."

"You know... Deidara and I had nightmares as well." Sasori said conversationally, though the fact that he was even participating was a sign of his apprehension of what they might have just stumbled onto.

"What? Who said *I* had one, yeah?"

"I found you at four in the morning brushing your teeth."

"Okay, so we're having some fuckin' weird dreams. So what? The bitch had nightmares for months and no one gave a flying fuck." Hidan said irritably. His voice was a bit louder than normal, which betrayed his own tension.

"Hidan and I were woken up by nasty dreams as well." Kakuzu explained.

"...So did we." Zetsu said, glancing around.

Tobi shook his head stubbornly. "Tobi didn't! I'm such a good boy so I suppose I haven't done anything to warrant nasty nightmares." he chirped proudly. Itachi nodded slightly, though whether in agreement or something else was up for debate.

Several sets of eyes turned towards the leader. Pein sighed, and then glared at them all. "You're acting like a bunch of idiotic genin if you're letting a few bad dreams make you uneasy." After continued staring, though, he relented and glanced towards Konan. "...Raise your hand if you had a nightmare the night before we started this sealing."

Eight hands went up. Itachi and Tobi were the only ones who didn't have nightmares, apparently. Itachi said he slept fitfully, on account of the remnants of his injuries, but the sleep he did get was dreamless. Tobi, as usual, slept like a log.

"This is weird." Kisame was visibly trying to resist reaching for the sword that wasn't there. They hadn't recovered it from Konoha, when it had been stolen by Suigetsu. Once all of these wars died down, there were plans to hunt down the younger Kiri-nin and get Samehada back.

"Quite." Kakuzu agreed. "And... let me guess. We all dreamed about *different* demons."

Partners looked at each other in something closer to panic than they'd ever gotten before. "I dreamt about the Ichibi, yeah."

"That fucking bitch. The Nibi."

"Sanbi."

"Yonbi—"

"This is a bunch of shit!" Pein burst out furiously, though it was hard to hide that even his hands were shaking slightly. "It's trauma, plain and simple. Normal for shinobi. You fought damn *demons*, of course you would have bad dreams about them! And since only one ninja went after each, that's why you're dreaming about yours. Simple. As. That."

The Akatsuki shut up after that, and instead just concentrated on the barely audible hum of chakra in the cavern. They didn't dare acknowledge what they'd all learned in that short, accidental conversation.

-.-.-

The night passed slowly. When dawn peeked over the horizon, the Ame-nin were distraught to find that they hadn't killed nearly as many as they'd thought. The remaining Konoha and Suna shinobi were camped on the far shore, having put out the forest fire just an hour before. The oily waters were still burning merrily, occasionally being refueled by a pair of clever Taki-nin. They had been the ones who had mainly orchestrated the plan and worked out the mechanics. Apparently they'd tried something like this in Takigakure that resulted in their defection; the two were now having a heyday trying it again on a grander scale with no repercussions.

"How are things going?" Midori asked solemnly, swinging down from one of the remaining trees to land beside the Taki-nin.

The two looked at each other. They were twins, and were nearly identical. Their levels of sadism seemed to be the primary way to tell them apart. "We have enough oil stocked up for seven days total, Midori-sama. This is day two."

"And that's *if* the Kiri-nin don't devise a way to put it out first." The incoming army of Kiri shinobi seemed to be the main problem they'd yet to devise a proper plan for. Everyone was nervous about that little aspect, but they still had three days to come up with something.

"Of course, it might take them a bit to figure out how to put the flames out." the first replied with a wide grin. He elaborated, "We've added a few special chemicals that might surprise them. Like pouring water directly onto the fire? Explosion. And you can't easily siphon the oil away, because again: *our* water plus *that* fire equals big *boom*! It'll be raining Kiri-nin!"

Midori nodded flatly. "Still, even with that, they'll outnumber us at least five to one. Have you two

got any more bright ideas for us to use to defend our village?"

The twins once again looked at each other, one of them smirking viciously. "*Actually*, if you'd just allow us to use the village wall as a—"

"*No*. The wall is to remain unused and untouched. That is our *last* defense in a worst-case scenario. The wall stays put." the Rain Lord said firmly, crossing her arms.

And so the days past. Agonizingly slowly. Midori generally stayed within sight of Daisuke and Hinata both, though occasionally she'd run off to check on some of the other Ame-nin. She was enjoying being in charge, though it gave her a new sympathy for Pein. At least he and the rest of the Akatsuki still outranked her. As long as she was busy, though, she was happy.

Most of the time, though, she just sat on top of the wall, staring out to the far-off camp of enemy shinobi behind the flames, with her bloodline limit on. The fire impaired her vision, as did the distance. And even so, she couldn't see anything. You can't see the weakness of something that isn't doing anything. But still, she'd figured out long ago that if there was sufficient shinobi and distance, she could see the flaws in a group, rather than individual. She met both requirements here, but she couldn't read them until they *did* something. They were probably foolishly waiting for the fire to die out, or perhaps for their Kiri allies to catch up.

Still, things looked as good as they could possibly get. The fire would hold them off until the Mist reinforcements arrived, and if those two Taki twins knew their stuff, then it might take another day or two for them to figure out how to get past it.

And then, just as the village was preparing themselves again for the fateful day when the Kiri-nin would arrive and break through their greatest defense, Midori received a letter.

The bird was almost shot down, until Daisuke jumped up onto the top of the Akatsuki tower to safely capture it before some idiot killed it. If the enemies were already *here*, then why kill the animals? She must have forgotten to tell the Ame-nin to ignore that law now.

Her bodyguard came back with a harried-looking falcon on one arm, feathers ruffled and as angry as a bird can get. It looked tired as well, so Midori was *very* curious as to why this bird was here. Then she spied the thick-looking scroll attached to its leg.

A scroll bearing a yellow seal.

With an eagerness and hope she couldn't afford to have, the green-eyed kunoichi tore the paper away from the startled bird, breaking the seal and unfurling it with a flourish. Daisuke tried to read over her shoulder, but she shooed him away and told him to take care of the bird. Instead, he gave it to Hinata, and told *her* to take care of the bird. Neither possessing the audacity or handy person to perform the same move, she sullenly moved off to their aviary.

The letter was full of political bullshit, but its meaning was quite clear.

"This..." she breathed, unable to believe it. She really couldn't believe it. It *couldn't* be possible.

"What? Let me see." Daisuke said, trying to get the paper from her. She just kept it out of his reach, trying to form a coherent sentence.

"This... this letter..."

"*What?* What is up with the freaking letter, Midori-chan?! I'm going to die of curiosity."

She twirled around to face him fully, eyes bright and grin broad. "This letter just won the war for us!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: What was that mysterious letter? What would it concern that it has the Rain Lord so optimistic about their situation? Who is it from? Konoha and Suna are waiting for their reinforcements to douse the sea of fire, so soon they'll probably breach the village itself. Can the trapped Ame-nin defend their village if its enemies are on the inside? And what of the Akatsuki? Those dreams don't seem to be a coincidence...

The Interlude of the Yellow Letter

*To whomever this may concern,
(Which is hopefully the chief executive of Amegakure)*

I am writing this letter for the third time today. It has been incredibly difficult for me and my men to make such an audacious move, but I hope that it will pay off in the end. I do not like to take such risks normally.

I have heard all about your situation, and had been debating for a long time whether or not to intervene in some small way. I am also well aware of the debacle that my village had a hand in earlier in the year, though I will assure you that you solved the problem in the swiftest and easiest of manners, and you left the village in capable hands: my own. Rest assured that it was a wise move, if spontaneous, and, from what I have deduced, unplanned.

On a smaller, but no less important, note, I am conscious of the fact that you have in your possession two Hyuuga, one of them unmarked. I am here to inform you that as a village and a country, we will not harm these two any further. And I hereby formally apologize for whatever problems the late Raikage caused in his quest for the Byakugan. We will not willingly harm any of your shinobi for such frivolous or casual reasons ever again.

I do not want to get involved in a shinobi war. But I must do what I can to stop this from escalating like the last Great Shinobi War. I can not and will not do anything to the shattered remains of Konohagakure. Their political ties are still strong and even depleted, their shinobi are some of the finest in all of the nations. I have, along with the other great villages, watched your struggle with them for the past few weeks, and applaud you for your courage and strength.

But, as I have said, I have no wish to get directly involved in this war. We have cooperated with the Akatsuki in the capture of the Nibi. But I am not risking my men or my equipment any further than I already have in this somewhat desperate, more-than-hopeful endeavor. I will dream fervently that you win this war, but I can do no more than what I have at this point.

We have given you the Nibi. Granted, we have also attacked you and your men, but we apologize for that and hope that you do not hold any grudges. And now our village will hopefully help in your noble venture and help you with this crucial, last leg of your journey.

Your informants have no doubt notified you of three enemy villages' mass movement of troops and supplies. Konoha's remains are mobilizing, and they have contacted both their allies Sunagakure and Kirigakure. Due to distance, Kirigakure is lagging behind, but they have also sent the most men in comparison to the other two villages.

Kirigakure will not be joining Suna and Konoha.

As a village we have successfully cut off their route, and ambushed much of their forces. I believe we've wiped out much of their men, and I also believe that Suna and Konoha are still in the dark about their reinforcements. I do this small favor for Amegakure and the Akatsuki in the hopes that we will be forgiven for past deeds and will not be punished as the other villages surely will be. I can not, as leader of this village, do anything more than that.

I wish you the best of luck. Rid the world of these demons and the arrogant shinobi who dare to try to stop you.

Sincerely and gratefully,

Suzuki Haruki

Godaime Raikage of Kumogakure

-.-.-

The letter was read dozens of time, many times by the same person trying to believe their eyes. Midori then excitedly called a village meeting, and read the letter aloud, and then explained patiently what this meant for Amegakure. By the time she was done, a huge cheer went up from the crowd.

Cruelly and happily, a copy of the letter was made, tied to an arrow on their large crossbow, and sent over the sea of fire to the enemy forces. "That ought to rile them up." Daisuke snickered, folding his hands behind his head. "I wish I could see their faces when they read *that*. No reinforcements for them..."

-.-.-

The days passed, until, on day five, Konoha and Suna broke through the flames with a vengeance that caught the Ame-nin off guard. And now the still-burning oily waters were their prison.

Defenses Go Down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Though he was unaware that the Taki twins had informed Midori of this aspect of their plan, Kakashi figured out how to get past the fire first.

Temari second, though her way was much more temporary, albeit faster.

Quite simply, her fan could tame the flames for a few minutes, though not put it out completely. It was a start, however. Because after five days of just sitting here, slightly charred and more than slightly pissed, they wanted to make some progress and beat the Ame-nin's collective face in.

Kakashi was the one who figured out how to get past it because of Temari, and because he had the great misfortune to watch one of the younger chuunin try to dump water on the inferno. It promptly exploded, killing the unfortunate man and nearly Kakashi as well. He was still nursing a few burns.

So then, at dusk on the fifth day of this backwards siege, they rallied and attacked.

It had been tricky, but with some help from Temari, Gaara and Obito's Sharingan, he pulled it off. Temari would blow the fire into submission, to which Gaara's sand quickly rushed in to further suppress the flames by making a wet, thick armor between the top of the oil and the rest of the fire. That would buy them some time. Kakashi had the hard part: forming seals fast enough to use that time, for one of the longest sign lists for any jutsu he'd ever used before. The last time he used it, he'd had the time; Zabuza had been doing the exact same thing at the exact same speed. Now was hardly the time to make the needed forty-four, but he didn't have a choice.

"Suiton: Suiryuudan no jutsu!"

If a bucket of water created an explosion strong enough to kill a man, what would a giant dragon made of the lake's own oily water do?

The dragon arced back over their heads, and then soared over the flames towards the village wall. The flames were practically up against the wall. Gaara watched mutely as his sand was all but blown away by the force of the water, but he could recollect that later. The primary mission here was to get *in* to Amegakure so they could start the revenge-fueled massacre. It was no secret that they outnumbered the Ame-nin terribly, but the only thing that had been stopping them was this wall of fire.

Had been stopping them.

With a terrific explosion that temporarily made them all deaf and even blew out half of the moat, the water jutsu crashed into the wall, spraying it and all of the surrounding flames with itself. The force of the jutsu itself cracked the wall; the explosion was just overkill at that point. But it got the job done.

Half the wall and most of the buildings that had been near it were gone, as well as the fire on the water. It was starting to grow again pitifully, though now was the time to act. Gaara and Kakashi both turned to their troops, gesturing out over to the chaos that lay before them. Temari jumped up and gave a swipe of her large fan, creating a space of fire-free water for them to walk on.

They traveled slowly, and they would have to take two groups, but they were making it. Temari would walk in front, blowing the flames out, and Gaara would bring up the rear, keeping the fire from incinerating them from behind with his sand.

When Kakashi first touched the scorched shore, he didn't feel much triumph at his successful plan.

-.-.-

"Move!" Midori only had that much time to warn anyone before the dragon hit the wall and the world promptly detonated. She hadn't bothered to go for the stairs—she just jumped off of the top of the village wall, not even looking for a suitable landing spot. If the Taki twins had known what they were doing, all she knew is that giant water dragon plus giant fire would equal destruction.

Next thing she knew, she was folded over one of the many pipes of the city, dazed and in pain.

The brunette girl dizzily looked down below her—or was it above her?—and saw a few feebly stirring bodies. She heard crackling sounds, and wondered what those were. Midori closed her eyes again, until she heard a metallic, grinding noise. *Now, what is that noise?* She asked herself. It sounded kind of familiar. Or maybe not familiar, but important. Her body was definitely reacting to the sound.

Then, all at once, one of the larger pipes above her gave way and fell down. Her shinobi training had pushed her out of harm's way just in time, watching dully as she and the pipe both fell to the ground, though at least she landed on her feet. Midori wasn't too sure that pipes had feet, but it didn't look pretty where it fell. All at once, the vertigo hit her, and she pitched sideways and nearly collapsed. "Urk, *shit...*"

"Is everybody alright?" That voice sounded familiar, too. Just the familiarity set her on edge; the last recognizable sound had almost killed her. But, looking around, Midori only found Daisuke. His back was to her and he was standing on a building's roof, looking around frantically to survey the damage they had just taken from a mistake and a single jutsu.

"Dai-Daisuke." she called out weakly, shaking her head to try to clear it. A bit stronger this time, she repeated, "Daisuke!"

He perked up once he spotted her, and jumped down and jogged over to her. Midori was enveloped in a bear hug before she could say anything. Just as quickly, Daisuke let her go, and then said breathlessly, "I don't think anyone died from the blast itself. But—they're coming. Slowly, and in two groups, but they're coming. We don't have time to do anything to keep the fire up, the blast blew a lot of it out..."

"H-Hey, slow down." she shook her head tiredly. "Can't we just dump more oil on the water?"

"That's... another problem." He looked away, smiling uneasily, and spread a hand towards the wreckage. In addition to the raw damage the explosion had caused, apparently the Taki twins had put the oil tanks that fed the fire just near the wall. What hadn't been eaten up in the blast was now splattered over everything. And everyone. Midori now noticed her own clothes, even her *hair*, stained black with oil. She looked up at her bodyguard in alarm. He was also coated in it, grinning sheepishly.

Everyone had oil on them, and they were surrounded by a sea of fire.

"Tell everyone to get this stuff off *now*!" the Rain Lord shrieked, pulling her own top off over her head. Her tank top was also soaked with splotches of oil, and she looked around at the other shinobi who were recovering from the explosion. They were just now noticing their problem as well. The enemy forces could wait; one stray spark or ember and half the village would be in flames.

Daisuke nodded curtly, and darted off back to his position on the rooftop. Midori ran off to the tower for some clean clothes, shouting to everyone she met along the way to hurry up and get changed out of their highly flammable garments. Those who had been on the other side of the village and were oil-free were recruited to try to get the buildings washed off before the enemies made it to the wall, or close enough to see their predicament. It would take just one blast note strapped to a kunai to reduce half the village and shinobi to ashes.

On her way to the tower, Midori nearly ran into Hinata, who was coming from the opposite direction. "Wh-What's going on?" she demanded breathlessly. There wasn't any oil on her, so she surmised that the Hyuuga hadn't been anywhere near the explosion.

"Be careful—there's oil everywhere. Don't get any on yourself. Try to get it off of the buildings, though." Midori brushed past her, and Hinata stood only for a moment before running in the direction that she'd just came. "Be careful! Our defenses have been broken!"

--.-

The Kazekage and his sister would have to go back across for the second half of the group, but Kakashi was confident that they could hold off the Ame-nin until they arrived.

When he saw what his jutsu had done to the village, however, Kakashi was fairly confident that a three-man cell would have been sufficient to hold them off. Barely anyone even paid them a glance as they ran up the steep shore. They were too busy trying to douse all of the buildings, or trying to get the oil off their clothing. Which was why Kakashi *almost* felt bad when he used a *Katon* on the nearest oil-soaked building and it went up in flames almost instantly.

At least they had the sense to give up on trying to salvage the buildings and instead turned to face them like real ninja. After all, if they won this war, no matter the cost, they would virtually rule the world. The power of the Bijuu, Konoha and its allies crushed, nothing in the path to domination. They could rebuild their village on a grander scale then.

Kakashi ducked under some man's strike, and brought his elbow up under his chin. The Ame-nin stumbled back from the force of the blow, and the Copy-nin took advantage of it to dart forward and plunge a kunai into the man's eye socket, driving the metal into his brain as he shrieked in pain. *How many is it I've killed today? This year? In my life, how many lives have I taken?*

"I really don't see how it matters. You're a shinobi. It's what you do." Kabuto had been such a stable in his life, from before, that Kakashi couldn't help but imagine the scolding he'd receive if he was caught thinking such thoughts. Shinobi didn't take the time to count the deaths. They just killed. Mindlessly and repeatedly.

Kakashi ran into a brawl of four or so ninja off to his right, yanking some kid out of it without a thought as to whose side he might be on. The kid didn't have a hitai-ate, but when he came after his supposed savior with a handful of shuriken, Kakashi decided that that wasn't a Konoha-nin. *Killing*

a kid... how fitting of a man of my skill.

"Even kids these days are dangerous, Kakashi. Haven't you learned that by now?" Kabuto, in his head, admonished. Kakashi nodded to both himself and the figment of his wishful imagination, and sidestepped some strike that came from behind. He didn't have time for this. The kid was still baring his teeth at the older man in a kind of grimace, and trying to hit him with a shuriken.

Kakashi created a shadow clone behind his young opponent and broke his neck mercifully. The kid went down with nothing louder than a sigh. *I must be getting old if I'm referring to some guy as old as he was as a 'kid'*, he thought with a small smile. Maybe he was getting old.

"Psh. You are not old, Hatake. But you do need to grow up if you are going to have your mid-life crisis in the middle of a battlefield."

I'm over thirty now. That's old. For a ninja, at least.

Kakashi instinctively bent backwards at the waist as an enemy who jumped from the rooftop skimmed over the spot where his head had just been. He kicked his legs out and caught whoever this one was just as they landed, kicking their legs out from under them. Kakashi had the ninja pinned before they could get back to their feet.

It was Hyuuga Neji.

Kakashi blinked in surprise; Neji just inhaled sharply. Before the white-haired man could properly attack, the Hyuuga slid out of his grasp with a *Kawarimi*. Not that Kakashi couldn't have caught up with him easily, but it only proved his point. Back when *he* was their age, he wasn't skipping around from village to village, attacking his own countrymen.

"That's because you acted like you were old and you were hopelessly naïve."

Shut up, Kabuto. I thought I wasn't supposed to be arguing with you in the middle of a battlefield?

"I said having your midlife crisis. Arguing with me is just a side-effect, I'm sure."

Kakashi kept moving deeper into the village. It was the first time he'd ever seen the inside of Amegakure, and was a bit depressed at how unhappy it seemed. It wasn't raining, true, but the buildings were all blues and grays, the streets were little more than packed-in mud, and there were large, dark pipes jutting out everywhere. He definitely preferred Konohagakure.

He saw the ripples on one of the nearby puddles, and backpedaled before the enemy shinobi could fully come out of the would-be trap. It was another younger shinobi, this time wearing a scored Waterfall headband. *Are they not even wearing Rain headbands anymore?*

"It's all the more confusing if they don't wear matching ones." Kabuto told him smartly. Kakashi would have throttled him for his arrogant attitude if he could've. *"Not to mention the psychological aspect. It's one thing to fight a war against one village, but just seeing all these different headbands automatically make your mind think different villages. More enemies."*

"Shut up, Kabuto." he hissed under his breath, circling the Taki-nin carefully. Age didn't matter, not anymore. Just because he was older didn't mean he was more skilled. The kid was rather scrawny looking, so raw taijutsu probably wasn't his strong point. Of course, he could have a softer style of hand-to-hand combat, like the Hyuuga. But chances were that he didn't.

"Be careful. He's going to feint left and then try to come in when you're unguarded and off-balance."

"I don't need you telling me what to do." Kakashi *knew* he was talking to himself, really. Kabuto was dead, he was gone, he was buried and probably rotting by now. He knew it was probably his ninja training and subconscious supplying this information for him, just in the façade of Kabuto to try to get him to believe it. Or maybe to preoccupy himself just so he didn't start trying to count how many he'd killed. But even if Kakashi knew all of this, it didn't mean he had the power to stop it. And at least he knew that *this* Kabuto wouldn't leave him. Not until he died.

That reminds me... I have to find Sasori...

-.-.-

"Midori!" Hinata had lost her escort again. Midori and Daisuke both had disappeared off of the face of the earth. And Hinata couldn't help but vividly remember what'd happened the last time she lost who she was supposed to be shadowing.

So here she was, in the middle of a battlefield. Fires were roaring all around her, from buildings and the moat both. Screams, shouts, metallic clangs, and then the occasional sickening, splattering sound as someone was disemboweled were adding to the chaos around her. People were running all around her, all of them in different directions, and none of them seemed familiar. Blood was mixing in with the mud and puddles underfoot. Soon, probably, the city would be overrun. Where would that leave them? Would they all be executed? What would happen to the Akatsuki...?

Hinata was about to start shouting again for either Midori or Daisuke when someone ran past and grabbed her wrist as she passed. Hanako looked back at her, fear filling her dark eyes. "Hyuuga-sama, you can't just stand there! We have to keep moving!"

Hinata let herself be led by the medic, unsure of how to react exactly. Still, there was strength in numbers, and surely two were better than one. The Hyuuga nodded grimly, and stopped letting herself be dragged along and instead ran side-by-side with her. "Do you know how anyone else is doing?"

Hanako let out a bark of laughter, bordering on hysterical. "I wish! Those damned Konoha-nin just spread out and created chaos everywhere. I haven't seen anyone I know since the explosion. Then I saw you and knew that we have to head for cover. Hopefully regroup before their reinforcements arrive!"

Oh yeah, there were more coming. Just great. Hinata nodded, bringing up one hand to activate the Byakugan. Chakra signatures were whizzing all around her, none of them recognizable. It seemed to be suddenly a village full of nothing but strangers, most of them out to kill her. Hadn't she seen a horror movie like that once? "Midori and Daisuke said that the tower was supposed to be our rendezvous point, but it's the highest point in the city. It'll be too obvious if we head there."

"Where else *is* there?"

Hinata racked her brain for some place that Midori would go, somewhere that they could regroup with a large amount of people. A building, somewhere covered... Somewhere that the enemies wouldn't expect, but something that the Rain Lord would expect Hinata and the commanders to know...

Then it hit her. "This way!"

Hinata turned sharply around the corner, having to grab Hanako's hand to stop her from overshooting the turn and ending up in a nasty two-on-one fight that was just down the road. The chuunin medic let herself be dragged along, their roles reversed now. Hinata was *sure* she got the location right. It had caused a big enough scandal at the time, and there was *no way* that she'd forget about that incident. Hopefully Midori had briefed the commanders on this as well... though if any of them were as smart as they were supposed to be, they should figure it out on their own.

"Where are we going?" the Kumo kunoichi shouted over the din of the battle.

"Just trust me! We'll get there soon!"

The two girls ran through the village, passing corpses and living shinobi alike. No one seemed to have the time or energy to pursue them. Now, however, Hinata seemed to be distinguishing familiar faces. Every man or woman they passed seemed to invoke a deep feeling of recollection, even if she knew she'd never seen them before. It was the familiarity of the knowledge that nearly everyone in the village was her enemy in one form or another.

The days passed with an excruciating sluggishness. It had been a week since the assault began, now, and when they realized it, a small cheer escaped a few lips before being hushed by the magnitude of what they'd gotten themselves into. But at least they only had a week left, right? Then the Akatsuki would be done with the Kyuubi, the enemies would have nothing left to fight for, and the Akatsuki would slaughter them all for what they did to Amegakure.

Somehow, and with an alarmingly good stroke of luck, word had traveled to just the right people. And now all of the surviving Ame forces were crowded into three—albeit large—buildings. It was nothing short of a miracle that they'd all known to come to this particular place in an emergency, or maybe it was a hive mentality. Regardless, all of the remaining Ame-nin were now packed into the three buildings that constituted the hot springs. Not just any onsen, either; it was the most memorable one in town. It was where Hinata and Midori first found out about Konan's pregnancy (though this fact only became public recently), and the scandal started.

Even if it was a bit crowded, at least it was one of the better buildings they could have gotten stuck in. There was plenty of hot and clean water, and the towels made excellent blankets, pillows and tourniquets. And the complimentary bath robes did wonders for those who hadn't been able to get the oil off of their clothes in time before the mass retreat.

Konoha and Suna shinobi were now prowling the streets like angry alley cats. They soon ambushed and massacred anyone caught outside. The Ame-nin holed up worked in their favor, too, so they mostly just let them be. Most of the stronger shinobi were set to work on the Akatsuki tower, which they were trying to break into to look for clues or possibly even the Akatsuki themselves. The war had suddenly gone cold, with little to no fighting.

Of course, it infuriated their enemies to no end when one of the faster shinobi would run past them and effortlessly get into the tower, just in front of them. It had been coded to allow most of the higher-ranked Ame soldiers into the tower, but no one else. It wasn't widely understood how the protective jutsu worked when it let so many people in, but it was widely accepted when Midori or one of the jounin commanders would make a 'tower run', as they were soon called.

More important than pissing off the Konoha- and Suna-nin, it provided a suitable distraction. Then a small force of other shinobi would sneak out of the onsen, for food, surveillance, or other supplies. So far, only one of these groups had been caught. Otherwise, it mostly worked. The Ame-nin used their home field advantage.

The fires on the water had died down a day or so ago, without the oil to keep them burning. The pathway to freedom was now clear, though no one wanted to leave. They wouldn't leave the only village to take them in. They would defend the Rain until the last man standing.

That's what most of the civilians had did, though. The mass murder of nearly all of the civilians in the city had the ninja thoroughly morose. True, they had taken a few of their adversaries down with them, but not exactly enough to put any sort of dent in the main army. But blood had mixed with the rare puddles and dried mud of Amegakure, and made for a somber sight when one of the tower runs would pass a family with their throats ripped out.

This war had definitely taken its toll on the villagers, and not just with the body count. But at least the wear was visible on their enemies' faces, too. Guerilla warfare was now becoming popular with the trapped Ame-nin, and they took out whoever they could on their runs on the outside.

And so the days dragged on. The Ame-nin would barricade themselves in their onsen, and try not to think about the loved ones lost. The opposing forces would be picked off one by one, more annoyed than anything else. High-ranking shinobi would run past them and taunt them with their access to the tower that they just couldn't seem to get into. The Akatsuki (hopefully) were wrapping up their final sealing and would be on their way to the rescue soon.

A day before their two weeks were up, the Ame-nin were thrown into turmoil once more. Four foreign shinobi crossed through the front gates, and broke the jutsus sealing the tower in a matter of hours. Then they came for the Rain ninja in the hot spring. And the massacre began.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Shinobi on both sides drop like flies! Who are these four, and what is their goal for this attack? The day of their two-week time limit, the day the Akatsuki are scheduled to reappear, and a catastrophe strikes. Casualties add up at a faster rate than ever, next time, in Dark Knight!

Severance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Hey! Be more careful! Remember, if you go down, then so do I!" Daisuke admonished, helping Midori back to her feet. They had just completed another tower run, though this time Midori had tripped over the finish line. Nothing major, but she just barely missed a kunai aimed at her forehead. Instead, she just got a shallow cut on the cheek.

The Rain Lord wiped a few droplets of blood off, smiling innocently. "Yeah, yeah, I know the details of our little deal. And as tempting as it sounds, I have a village to lead until Pein-sama gets back."

Daisuke rolled his eyes, but at least it was good-naturedly. Of *course* he didn't really want anything to happen to Midori, and he knew, deep down, that she didn't want anything to happen to him, either. *Very* deep down.

-.-.-

"I think you're making progress. Which is good. Considering you've had how long to work on this, exactly?" In Kakashi's mind, Kabuto was still there. Telling him off most of the time. Kakashi just tried to ignore him, and work on unraveling this jutsu. Even with the Sharingan, it was getting to be quite frustrating. He had definitely made progress, taking out a lot of the preliminary precautions and protections, but the few, stronger jutsus were still firmly in place. If only they had someone who *wasn't* exhausted, nearly out of chakra and talking to figments of his imagination, around his skill level, and with a sufficiently strong head-on jutsu... they could probably break through. Raw strength or extra time is what they needed now. They couldn't have either.

"Shut *up*, Kabuto. I'm doing the best I can," he replied in a low growl, wiping the sweat out of his eyes. His hitai-ate was already soaked with it, and was doing little to nothing to keep it out of his eyes now. *But at least I'm still alive. I've hung on this long, just another day or so.*

Gaara probably could be the one to finally break through the last barriers, but he just didn't have the sand needed. Or the strength. He and Temari had taken shifts going out to the shore and hauling in buckets of dirt and mud to try to get some sand out of it, but with little luck. At least they were pretending to do something productive.

"If only you had one last burst of strength. A Chidori would work nicely, wouldn't it? Oh, but you can't do one right now. You're too tired. Such a pity."

"I don't need that right now. I *can't* do a *Chidori*. You know that..." Kakashi replied in a pathetic defense. He couldn't think of something other than that.

Most of his troops had gotten used to his half-aloud conversations by now, ignoring him unless he was shouting orders at them. Kakashi hardly noticed he was speaking out loud.

"Sir, there is someone coming. A group." The Copy-nin didn't even jump when Sai suddenly appeared right by his shoulder. He didn't have the energy to, and plus, he *was* still a shinobi.

Shinobi didn't jump.

"How many?" Kakashi asked disinterestedly. After finding out about the lack of Kiri reinforcements, he didn't much care about any of the other villages right now.

"Four, we count." Sai replied in a flat voice, not caring about his superior's lack of curiosity. "We think... it's Uchiha Sasuke and his group."

Kakashi perked up instantly, nearly hitting his head on Sai's chin. "*And all you need is another Chidori...*" Kabuto echoed in his mind, smirking devilishly as he pushed his glasses up higher on his nose.

-.-.-

"Hey, Sasuke-kun, why are we coming to this dump?" Suigetsu asked in a high-pitched voice, doing a rather good imitation of Karin.

She huffed and crossed her arms, glaring daggers at the back of his head. "I do *not* sound like that. Sasuke-kun wants to find out *exactly* where Itachi is, you know that. Some Ame-nin will probably know that."

"Oh, that's right! Because you suck at being a tracker, like you were supposed to be." the Kiri-nin replied with a broad, sharp grin. Karin punched him in the shoulder, and he only made a wet splat sound upon impact. He spent the next few minutes trying to fix his shoulder (luckily the Land of Rain had plenty of water to refill his water bottles and the like with), whereas Karin soon took his spot next to Sasuke.

"Still no sign of Itachi?" he asked quietly, keeping his eyes forward.

"No. I-I mean—I know that he's in this general area. But there's so many protective jutsus and other chakras in this little area, it's hard to pinpoint. Probably in the village itself, though." she said, eager to please.

"Probably the Akatsuki's doing." Juugo remarked airily, looking up at the overcast sky. There were no animals about, and the air smelt burnt. Which was bizarre, considering they were in the Land of *Rain*. They had passed a charred forest a little bit earlier, though, and chalked it up to that. "They would want to fool everyone as to where their real location is while they perform the last sealing."

"Yeah, yeah..." Suigetsu sighed, running a hand through his hair. "So that just means that we have to rough up a few Ame-nin before we get our answers. I bet the Rain Lord would know. I've heard that she's actually fighting in this little war."

"If we could find her. No one seems to know who she is." Karin replied venomously, shooting his idea down.

Suigetsu smiled at her, and said, "You know, if we had recruited that Hyuuga when we'd had the chance, I bet the Byakugan wouldn't have nearly as many problems as this chakra-sensing."

His face soon became nothing more than a puddle, thanks to his teammate.

Sasuke and Juugo sighed in unison, wondering when they'd have to stop putting up with this shit.

--.

"Don't. I'm fine."

"A broken arm is *not* fine."

"I can still fight. That's all that matters right now."

"No, it doesn't! Hold on, I'll get a medic to look at it for you."

"It's *just* a broken arm, Hinata!" Neji shouted in exasperation, drawing the stares of several nearby ninja. Hinata turned red at the sudden, unwanted attention, and hastily turned her back to the crowd, continuing bandaging his arm. Though now there wasn't nearly as much gentle, caring kindness as there had been. Revenge, no doubt.

"I wonder where Ohira-san is..." she mumbled to herself, tying the knot on the bandages a bit tighter than they strictly needed to be. Neji winced slightly, but didn't say anything about the passive abuse.

"She and the two Taki-nin went on a supply run while Midori and Daisuke played the part of the distraction," he replied. She looked up at him, clearly not expecting or wanting him to actually answer. He just shrugged, and then hissed in pain when that involved her yanking his arm back down into her lap so she could finish trying to fix it.

Hinata knew basic medical jutsu. Well, alright, *more* than basic. She couldn't help but have more than a cursory knowledge, what with friends like Sakura and Kabuto. But most of her skills lay with her medical jutsu mixed with her Byakugan; she was more of an inner type of medic. She wasn't good with broken bones and more superficial injuries. Give her a damaged lung, and she could heal it in a few minutes, good as new. Give her a broken arm, and you get what Neji was going through. She had only ever tried to mend broken bones a few times before, and those results weren't any prettier. (Hinata was fairly certain that Deidara still had a few problems with that shoulder of his.)

"Will you hold still?"

"You've done all you can. It's fine. I'll just go see a medic-nin now." Neji replied stiffly, trying very hard not to move his arm. At least she was done fiddling with the bandages. Hopefully. Hinata smiled brightly at him, well aware of the fact that he would have to get in line for a proper healing. Their medics had been nearly annihilated with the war in Konohagakure, and now they were holding onto a precious few who were overtaxing themselves trying to save everyone. Two medic-nin had already collapsed from exhaustion, and one of them had actually gone into convulsions and nearly died.

"Hey, Hyuuga. Can you do a quick scan of the surroundings? Hanako-taichou is taking too long to get back here." one of the jounin commanders shouted over the dull mumble of the crowd. Neji and Hinata looked at each other, wondering who he was asking. Hinata decided to do it herself; Neji didn't need any more stress right now.

"Hmm... Two bodies are coming this way, down the western street. It looks like... Ohira-san and one of the Taki-nin. ...He's limping! Oh no, they've been attacked!" It took a few moments for her to realize it, but then Hinata spotted the obvious injuries. One of the two seemed to be trailing

blood behind them.

A swarm of Ame-nin shot outside faster than she could shut off her bloodline limit. They certainly didn't want the enemies to pick off another of their medics, and especially not the medic commander. Both Hyuuga stood up as the crowd surged back inside the safety of the building, and everything seemed silent.

"We-We were attacked!" Hinata couldn't tell from her spot which of the twins it was. Then again, she didn't know either of their names, and she'd only met them once before. He was supporting Hanako, who seemed barely conscious. Her dark eyes were lidded and glazed over, and her hair had fallen out of its bun and was matted with blood. She was wearing the Taki-nin's flak vest, for some reason. Said Taki-nin continued his hurried, broken explanation, "They killed Ren! Th-They killed Ren...!"

That must be his brother. But if these two got away, and were still in such rough shape, then what would happen when Midori and Daisuke tried to get back out of the tower?

Hanako had to be carried over to one of the makeshift beds that the severely injured occupied, and the few remaining medics bustled around her apprehensively. Would they lose another commander? What had happened?

One of the jounin commanders was now trying to calm the remaining Taki twin down, but he was probably going into shock. "Calm down, I say—calm down, boy! We need to keep you talking. You're a ninja. You know what shock does to a body. You can't get hysterical—calm down, calm down, there, there—just take deep breaths and tell us what happened."

"Th-They... they're not Konoha-nin."

"Suna-nin? Those bastards."

Gulping down a lungful of air, the Taki-nin shook his head. "No. They didn't wear hitai-ates. They—they just strolled on in to the village, and we-we were on our way to the tower, to tell Midori-sama that it's all clear, b-but—"

"No hitai-ates?" the murmur went through the crowd, repeated by just about everyone. In their corner, Hinata felt herself go cold.

She turned to face Neji, who had a perfectly blank expression on his face. "N-Neji, do you think —"

He shook his head, and raised his good arm up to activate the Byakugan. After a few moments of searching, he just said softly, "Shit. It is."

"Oh god, no." Hinata took a deep breath, feeling like hyperventilating herself. It had to be Sasuke, and his group. Only unlike their other enemies, he wasn't concerned with breaking into the tower. He would storm their base immediately, looking for his brother. And he was nearly Akatsuki-level himself; how would they hold that away?

"Kakeru! For—would you just calm down?!"

"They killed Ren! They killed Ren!"

Across the room, a shrill scream went up. Eyes turned towards the source. Upon taking off Hanako's borrowed flak jacket, they found out why she was wearing it; it was to keep her in one piece. There was nothing left of her torso, it seemed. A few ribs, most of them broken, a feebly

beating heart, half a lung and the bloody remains of the rest of her organs. The flesh around the horrid wound was shredded and torn, almost looking like bits of confetti.

With a small gurgle, in which blood filled up her mouth and ran down her cheek, Ohira Hanako died.

One of the medics turned aside and threw up, and more screams were starting to echo around the room. It seemed hysteria was contagious.

Kakeru was still shouting as well, repeatedly, that they killed his brother. It didn't help the growing panic.

Neji stood up, to get a better look at the dead girl's wound. He knew the group better than anyone in the village, probably. He turned sharply to Hinata, and asked, "Didn't you say that Kisame never got his sword back?"

"I-I think so, but I don't know—"

"Shit. *Shit*. Suigetsu has two of the swords now. At *least*." He turned on his heel and started pacing, clenching his fists at his sides. "Sasuke is going to be angry; he won't be able to find Itachi. He is going to come here and let that team of his have free rein on all these people until he finds out where he is. Shit. How many people here even *know* what Samehada can do to you?!"

Hinata turned and walked away from him, pushing her way through the crowd. She snagged on one of the few remaining medics, dragging him back through the mass with her. The dark-haired kunoichi pointed at Neji, and said in a shaky voice, "Heal him. Now."

"Uh—okay."

Once his arm was better, she grabbed it and led him through the crowd to where she'd spotted his jounin commander. "We need to speak to everyone!" she said in a firm voice. The man raised both eyebrows, never having heard her make an actual demand before. "Now! We know who did this, we know their fighting styles, and we know what they're after."

That was as good of a reason as any right then.

-.-.-

"Hey, I haven't seen Hanako yet. I wonder if they're having troubles." Midori leaned out of the top window of the tower, putting her chin in her hands.

"I'm pretty sure I saw one of the Taki twins earlier. Don't know which one, though." Daisuke shrugged, flipping through the book he was trying to read. They'd been up here for almost an hour now, the longest tower run yet. There might have been a hitch, or they could have simply ran back to the onsen without giving them the all-clear signal. That had happened twice before.

"Should we just leave? At least it'll cause another distraction if they need it." Midori pushed herself off of the windowsill, stretching.

"Hmm... Down there, they look like ants." Daisuke was leaning over the edge, practically balancing on the windowsill. The Rain Lord hauled him back inside irritably. "No, seriously! They

look like ants."

"I've seen ants before. I know what they look like."

"...Huh, now they look like angry ants. Like you just stomped on their anthill a few times and poked it with a stick." He was back leaning over the edge a few moments after she let him go. Midori sighed in vexation, and decided to humor him, scooting him over with her hip and leaning out beside him.

"They *do* look like ants. You'd think that their queen was in jeopardy or something, the way they're acting."

"Who would be their queen? I thought Hidan already killed her off."

"I dunno, maybe that blonde-haired chick that hangs out with the Kazekage."

"Temari? Maybe. Though I'd feel sorry for whoever's poking *her* with a stick. She'd take it and shove it right up their ass."

"Most kunoichi I know would do that, you know. We don't like to be poked with sticks. Of any kind."

Ignoring the jab, Daisuke leaned farther out the window, practically hanging upside-down. "Hey... that little ant down there looks kinda familiar."

The little ants milled around for a moment, probably talking. Daisuke tilted his head to the side, trying to decipher if that haircut was what he thought it was. Right color, certainly, but not exactly distinguishable from this height.

"Who cares? Even if they *have* called in reinforcements, it's only four people. *And* Pein-sama will be done later tonight, probably. Sometime really soon." She sighed and stepped back into the room, waiting impatiently for him to be done with his sightseeing.

"No, I'm serious. I think I know who the little ants are. Well, no, nevermind... wait, I think it could be... no..."

"Make up your mind already, Ikari!" she cried, rolling her green eyes. Midori crossed her arms and tapped her foot, an audible countdown until she started hitting him. "We need to get back."

When the little black-haired ant down below created a *Chidori*, Daisuke knew exactly who he was dealing with. "Shit. Midori, we have to leave, *now*!"

"Isn't that what I've been saying?"

All of a sudden, the shields around them died, leaving an aftertaste of chakra in the air that made his head spin a bit. Midori looked shocked, and was already running to the nearest window before he could tell her to. The pair practically threw themselves out of it, landing on the nearest rooftop almost ten stories below, and were only a few steps ahead of the Suna-nin sent to capture or kill them.

Just before they ran out of hearing range, Daisuke heard Suigetsu say smugly, "See? *That's* what the Rain Lord looks like, Karin."

Oh damn. They're after Midori now? Somehow, Daisuke hadn't counted on that fact when he'd signed up for the job. (Not that he actually *signed up*, but that's irrelevant.) Sure, he'd love nothing

more than to turn around and go try to beat Sasuke's face in, but he had a feeling that Suigetsu and the other two wouldn't like that very much. And without taking precious time to explain *why* he would like to do so, Midori might actually stop, turn around, and attempt to help him.

The pair ducked around a corner, and caught their Suna pursuers as they rounded it. The three ninja went down without more than a sound. Daisuke carefully peeked around the corner. Sasuke was talking to Kakashi, with the red-haired girl standing next to him.

Then, two things happened at once. The first was that Sasuke's head tilted slightly to the right, and he locked gazes with Daisuke for the briefest moment. The second was that he realized Suigetsu was missing from the group.

"Well, well, well. Look at what *I* just caught."

Okay, so he wasn't missing any more. He knew exactly where the Kiri-nin was *now*.

"Oh, hey, Suigetsu. Long time no see." Daisuke said casually, raising a hand in greeting. Midori turned to look at him in disbelief.

"Oh, much too long. Though I do recall that in the Konoha assault you stopped to say hi to Sasuke, just not *me*. That breaks my heart." Suigetsu leaned back and clasped his heart, as if he'd die from the pain of it. Daisuke noticed that he now had *two* swords, both of them strapped to his back in a cross. It looked absurd, the two oversized swords, along with his pose.

Though it didn't exactly evoke laughter from either of the other two. Daisuke noticed shrewdly that Suigetsu had bulked up a bit, in addition to the second sword. Probably necessary so he could lug them both around all day. But the most dangerous thing was that now, in addition to Zabuza's zanbato, he had Kisame's Samehada. Could he even wield it properly? If he could, things could get interesting very quickly.

"So, what are you and your beloved Sasuke-kun doing in Amegakure, hm?" Daisuke asked.

"Murdering, pillaging, massacring, looking for Itachi. The usual."

"You're not going to find Itachi until he comes out on his own." Midori broke in, a bit unwisely. Suigetsu turned to her, grinning broadly. His sharpened teeth caught the dim light from the overcast sky above, but the icy-eyed girl held her ground.

"That's precisely why we want to talk to *you*, little miss Rain Lord."

"Hey, neither of us know where Itachi is." Daisuke said quickly, stepping in between them. Which was a lie, of course; Midori did know, but she was the only one. No need for the white-haired Kiri-nin to know that. "He's with the rest of the Akatsuki, sealing the Kyuubi. They should be almost done, so if you could just come back in a few hours, I'll see if we can make an appointment for you."

Whether or not Suigetsu saw through his lie was a mystery. He just narrowed his eyes a bit, and said, "Is that so."

Then the two nodded, in unison, and disappeared out of the scene with a *Shunshin*. Suigetsu, a bit too late on the uptake, didn't catch them in time and instead ran back out to where Sasuke could see him. He waved his arms and shook his head, and the rest of Team Hebi disappeared with the body flicker technique, bent on capturing their prey before they made it back.

Of course it would be too risky to split up, or head right back to their safe zone. It could get more

than themselves killed. They would have to zigzag across the village until they could be sure that they lost them. Midori appeared in a shadowed corner near the business district, chest heaving. She breathed through her mouth to keep herself quiet, looking around curiously. Where was Daisuke? Had she lost him on that last turn?

Then, a hand clamped over her mouth, and a voice hissed in her ear, "Don't cry out. If you make a sound I'll have to slit that pretty little throat of yours. And we really don't want that, do we?"

Midori bit down on the hand, hard enough to draw blood. The voice, now definitely female, grunted in pain but didn't relinquish her grasp.

"Just tell me what kind of jutsus are still blocking wherever the sealing is taking place," the female voice whispered under her breath. Midori thought about that; she didn't want to know the *location*? That was odd.

Before the captive brunette could reply, there was a grunt from her captor, and suddenly Midori had to support both their weight. But as soon as that happened, the woman behind her got off, whirling around, and cursing in a high voice. "Damn it! Suigetsu, get your ass down here! I can't walk, the bastard kneecapped me!"

Daisuke was suddenly there as well, holding out his hand for Midori to take. "Well? We don't have a whole lot of time now."

Midori rolled her eyes. "I could have taken her."

"But that wouldn't make my job as a bodyguard any more interesting, now would it?"

Midori laughed, but conceded defeat. "Alright, okay, you get to save me once in awhile. But not often, okay?"

"Deal."

Together, they used another *Shunshin* to appear just down the street from the bathhouse. Hopefully the disarmed kunoichi would throw enough of a tantrum to distract the other three in time for a quick debriefing and scattering of their troops.

"Alright, so I know half of the group, and what they're capable of. Suigetsu's practically harmless if you can keep away from his swords, though I don't know what he can do with Samehada. We might want to take that away from him. Sasuke is a bit trickier. He's fast as hell and I guess he's picked up a katana somewhere along the lines as well, and he has the Sharingan. Though against your bloodline limit, he might have a bit of trouble. I don't know anything about the girl—though she wasn't that hard to take out—or the big guy." Daisuke talked as he ran, and Midori just nodded like an obedient student.

"Well, if we just pull our troops out of the onsen and go for a full-on assault, hopefully we can beat them with sheer numbers. Plus, the Akatsuki will soon be out, and they can come save our asses if need be. It should only be a few more hours. And then—" Midori suddenly stumbled backward, jerking her hand out of Daisuke's. He turned back to look at her, wondering what was up with her attitude.

She was looking down at where a kunai and several shuriken were buried in her chest. Blood was rapidly being absorbed by her shirt front, staining it a dark brown. Midori looked up for her assailant, still breathing normally and eyes ice-colored. They were probably superficial wounds.

Even so, Daisuke turned around fully and took a step towards her, but she held up a hand. "Don't,

Dai—"

Then two more kunai flew out of the air behind them. One nicked Daisuke's ear, but both of them found their primary target; they embedded themselves in Midori's throat, sticking out the other end. Her eyes widened, and she stumbled back another few steps from the force of it. Okay, now it was getting serious. Her hands flew up to her throat, trying to stem the bleeding, even as her eyes faded from light to dark.

Just before she fell forward onto her knees, the last kunai came, and hit her squarely in the middle of the forehead. Death was instantaneous. The Rain Lord fell backwards, landing with a splash in a puddle, eyes blank and staring at the sky.

"Now that she's taken care of, *you* are going to tell me where Itachi is." Sasuke stepped up beside Daisuke, looking dispassionately down at the body.

Daisuke's only answer was to turn and punch the Uchiha straight in the jaw, hard enough to feel bone crack beneath his fist. Sasuke stumbled backward, already reaching down to form a *Chidori* with a sour expression on his face. Daisuke reached down and grabbed his sword, narrowing his eyes.

The two started their fight, not ten feet from Midori's body. And to think, they had only been a few yards from the safety of Ame's temporary headquarters.

"Midori-sama is dead!"

The crowd was silent instantly. All battle plans were paused in mid-sentence, and all conversations about the horrors of this war were halted altogether. Eyes turned instinctively towards the windows, thoroughly astonished when they saw two shinobi fighting just outside, and their Rain Lord lying, dead, in a puddle.

Then the Ame-nin surged forward in a collective unit.

Once the doors were opened, what seemed like a monster met them. He was taller than almost all of them, with crazed eyes and black markings spreading all over his skin. He literally ripped apart the nearest shinobi, limb from limb.

The collective unit surged back inside, caught between screaming and fleeing, and staying and fighting to the death. Which it would undoubtedly be. Through windows and other doors, they trickled outside, swarming out to defend themselves and their village. A few of the medics reverently carried Midori's body out of the way, whereas the masses started killing anything that moved with a vengeance. A few tried to break up the fight between Daisuke and Sasuke, but were rather quickly killed by the clashing shinobi. Then the Ame-nin decided to go for the rest of the Uchiha's team, and the remaining Konoha- and Suna-nin. Outnumbered or not, they were going to make this a *war*. They were now out for blood.

Hinata had been separated, yet again, from her escort. She would have sighed at how often that was happening lately, if she'd had time. But instead, she, along with Kakeru, were facing down the monster of a man.

Neji was outside, locked in combat with Suigetsu for the third time in his life. He was holding his own, but Samehada was eating through his chakra-filled strikes and *Kaiten* a bit too easily for his tastes.

Daisuke was trading blows with Sasuke, his rage channeling into each attack with a vengeance. Sasuke seemed a bit blindsided by the ferocity of this, but was keeping on par with him effortlessly nonetheless.

The other two, clueless groups of shinobi were currently ransacking the Akatsuki tower, looking for any valuable information. They were soon overrun by Ame-nin, who locked and sealed all of the doors and set fire to the building. Most of the ones inside got out, but not quite all. They were quite caught off guard by the sudden ambush, but fought for all they were worth.

Soon, yet again, the streets were filled with fighting.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: And the Akatsuki come out of their sealing chamber, to behold the chaos and carnage of their village...

Monsters And Mission Reports

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Tell me I'm seeing things. Tell me I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing. Because I see *Uchiha Sasuke*, the little prick, and not nearly as many Ame-nin as I had before. So obviously I must be hallucinating."

Most of the other Akatsuki members edged away from their leader.

The exhausted ten stood on one of the cliffs bordering Amegakure, looking out at the chaos below. The tower was on fire. There was enough blood on the streets to be visible from even *this* height. Little dots ran to and fro, killing indiscriminately, letting bodies lay where they died. There was now a *moat* around the village.

"This is what you get for wanting to seal the little fucker before killing everyone else." Hidan mumbled under his breath. Raising his voice, he added, "So are we gonna go down there and kick some major ass, or just sit up here and wonder what they did to the damn village? I want to get this over and fuckin' done with so I can go get shitfaced..."

"I must be seeing things." Pein muttered, rubbing his eyes, mindful of his piercings. But nope, the village was still in turmoil below him. "Oh, I am going to *kill* someone for letting my village get this bad."

Tobi cleared his throat. "Can we just go...?"

Pein sighed. Karma must be catching up with him already. It'd take years—no, *decades*—to get Amegakure back to some semblance of normal... but at least they were done with the final sealing. Now all that was left was to kill some people and complete the jutsu itself. And then, perfect world, with all the time in the world to rebuild their city and country.

"Go down there. Kill anyone who's wearing a Konoha or Suna hitai-ate. Itachi, you stay the hell away from Sasuke, let someone else take care of him."

"Yes, sir," Itachi sulkily replied.

"I want the heads of both Suna and Konoha leaders in my room by sunset. And Kisame, for god's sake, please put out the tower."

-.-.-

Hinata ducked under the monster's arm, which had somehow transformed itself into an ax. She might have just gotten another unwanted haircut, but she had more important things to worry about right then. Like the fact that this bizarre man was trying to decapitate them with his *arm*. Which was a *blade*. Somehow.

Kakeru—that was the Taki-nin's name, right?—nearly got beheaded by the behemoth, but managed to turn his close-quarter position into a kick straight to the gut. The man grunted, but

didn't do anything else. Kakeru wisely backed off after that.

"The girl, it should be the girl—no, the boy. Definitely the boy. First, the boy. But it should be the girl first, shouldn't it be? Ladies first, after all. But no, no, no, this guy should go first." All the while this man had been saying something along the lines of that under his breath, eyes darting back and forth between the two. Hinata didn't know what he was trying to decide, but it couldn't have been good.

"Hey! Juugo! Hurry it up in there!" someone shouted from outside. Hinata and Kakeru looked at each other. So now they knew the man's name, and apparently he was powerful enough for someone to expect him to have finished them both off by now. It wasn't a comforting notion.

Juugo kept swinging his ax-arm back and forth like a horizontal pendulum, moving them both back deeper into the building. Soon they were on the very surface of one of the hot springs, the steam still rising up and bathing them all in a soft, warm glow. He darted forward, but it turned out to be a feint. Both of the Ame-nin fell for it, halfway across the pool of water by then.

Then, while they were regaining their footing, Juugo attacked for real. He went for Hinata, but then, on yet another one of his change of whims, he swerved and instead attacked Kakeru. The Taki-nin ducked under his ax effortlessly.

Hinata saw the subsequent attack before her ally did. "Watch out!"

Kakeru half-turned to face her, a wildly stupid move for a shinobi to do. In fact, Hinata had never seen anyone actually *do* that in a serious fight before. It just didn't happen. She covered her eyes with her hands, wondering if she had just killed him. Juugo's other arm had transformed itself into a spear of some sort, and was already halfway into his stomach, punching out of the other side with a cracking sound that could have only been his spine snapping—and then Kakeru vanished in a puff of smoke.

Before Juugo could react past his orange eyes widening, the heated water below him shot up below his feet, engulfing him. Kakeru stepped out of one of the pillars of water, brushing wet hair out of his eyes. He gave Hinata a small, secretive smile. "I don't think I'm stupid enough to actually fall for that, but the concern is somewhat appreciated."

"Sorry," she replied weakly, watching the watery bubble form around Juugo.

"That's probably not going to hold him for long. It's not like the actual technique; this is more of a rip-off." She didn't know what technique, exactly, he was referring to, but she just took his word for it. But at least they had their monstrous enemy on the defensive now, right? "Hey, Hyuuga-san. You can kill people with those eyes of yours, right?"

"Well, not exactly, they just see—"

"I mean, you can use them to kill him, right?" Kakeru asked impatiently, glancing back nervously at the imprisoned Juugo.

"Yes, if I had enough time to strike all of his vital spots, but I don't think he's going to stand still long enough for that. It's generally used if you're faster than your opponent, or have the element of surprise, or if they're incapacitated. Otherwise, the *Juuken* style is generally used just for disabling chakra of enemies..."

"Yeah, yeah, I didn't want a history of the style." He flapped a hand in the air, waving her explanation off. Hinata blushed in embarrassment, though she was a bit miffed that he didn't even

seem to care about it. If he thought she was going to kill Juugo, then shouldn't he be more concerned that it would take more time? Sure, he was supposedly a genius, but he should at least take into consideration her actual in-combat skills if he wanted to use her. "So you just need time, right?"

The hot water bubble then promptly exploded, showering both of them with scalding water. Juugo emerged from the surge of steam, mildly burned and chest heaving for oxygen. He didn't look very happy.

Before Juugo could properly clear his head and orient himself—a split second timeframe for ninja these days—Kakeru charged.

The monster with the ax-arm instinctively brought up his other arm, the one shaped like a lance, and Kakeru neatly ran into it. Hinata couldn't help but think back to when she and Kabuto had used the same strategy on Kakuzu almost a year ago. Hopefully it'd work on Juugo.

That's when blood started seeping out of the puncture wound.

"Well? What the hell are you waiting for, huh? I'm giving you time!" the Taki-nin shouted over his shoulder. Hinata realized that he was also holding Juugo's shoulder, keeping him steady and stationary.

"Wh-Why did you just *do* that?!" she asked in a higher voice than she would have liked.

Juugo was trying to yank his arm out of Kakeru, but the younger held it still. The orange-headed ninja even resorted to turning it into different weapons, to try to either cut his way back out, or make the Taki-nin let go. Kakeru wouldn't let go, and Juugo's arm couldn't get the proper purchase to do anything more than superficial damage. "Let—go—!" he grunted, but Kakeru just wouldn't budge.

"Ngh—hurry up!" Kakeru shouted, digging his heels in to the water to keep them both relatively motionless targets. "This is starting to hurt!"

Biting her lip, Hinata activated her Byakugan and hesitantly took a few steps forward. After seeing that, aside from one arm, Juugo was pretty much stuck, she decided that she ought to do what her comrade said. Closing her eyes once to clear her mind, she reopened them and started pinpointing her targets.

Hinata first pushed a thin sheet of chakra into the base of Juugo's throat. This would temporarily cut off oxygen to his lungs, so he wouldn't be able to struggle or hit her with his other arm. She didn't fancy taking Kakeru's route. Then she grabbed said arm, and closed all of the tenketsu points, so Juugo was effectively incapacitated.

She then started pushing chakra into Juugo's body, both careful to keep Kakeru from getting any of it, and to aim for the vital organs. Such a sloppy mess of an attack would undoubtedly make her father cringe (if he was even still alive), which was precisely why she was doing it this way. It took longer to shut down his chakra, but it took less time than a *Hakke Rokujuuyon Sho* to kill someone. All Hyuuga were taught that in a pinch, to just push their chakra into their enemy's body and hope it simply overloaded their system. Generally it worked.

But Juugo's chakra system was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. It was snarled and darker and it seemed to repel her attacks effortlessly. It probably had something to do with the black markings on his skin. Hinata switched tactics, and hoped to every god she knew (excluding Jashin) that this would work. She put both hands on his chest, directly over his heart. Yes, he was much

taller than her and she nearly had to stand on tip-toes to reach, but Hinata managed it.

And then she forced all of her free chakra into his heart.

His chakra instantly reacted. The markings on his skin disappeared, and it rushed back into his system to try to fight this foreign threat. It was too late, however. There was enough force in the chakra to sever several nearby arteries, and if his heart didn't give out first, he'd die of internal hemorrhaging. The strength of her chakra, though, made his lash out. She stumbled backward with chakra-burned hands, dizzy from the sudden influx of chakra in her system. But like any good Hyuuga, she knew how to incorporate foreign chakra into her own body easily.

Juugo seemed aware of what his heart had just taken, and now seemed hell-bent on taking both of them down with him. But with one useless arm and the other still stuck in Kakeru, there wasn't much he could do. The taller man grunted and fell forward onto his knees, dragging the Waterfall shinobi down with him. "Sh-Should have taken the girl out first..." Juugo mumbled, scowling.

Then, he fell backwards onto the water, yet again dragging Kakeru down with him. Hinata ran forward to help disentangle him from the dying body, but they were both under the water before she reached them. She shut off the chakra keeping her above, and sunk down with a splash to the rescue.

Kakeru looked at her with wide eyes, still trailing a bit of blood from his injury. He shook his head frantically, and pointed to Juugo, who by now was either dead or a very good imitation of it. Hinata swam over, careful to get near the monster, just in case he would try for one last attack. The water was hot and stung her eyes a bit, but she was fairly certain that she could pull them apart before Kakeru drowned.

Then Kakeru mouthed something. Three simple words, and then another point to Juugo. Hinata stopped in her pursuit of them, silently floating there, watching with sad eyes. Kakeru grinned brightly at her, bubbles escaping out of his mouth from his lungs. Hinata turned away, and then swam back up to the surface. "He killed Ren."

And she was, yet again, torn between hating shinobi and revering them for their ideals and unique kind of morality.

--.-

"Where are you going? Konoha-nin are dying back there. Itachi is being merciless. Aren't you going to try to stop him?" Kabuto asked, his voice high and childish. If Kakashi didn't know any better, he'd say that Kabuto knew *exactly* where he was going, and didn't want him to. Even in death, Kabuto was *worrying* about him.

"I'm going to find Sasori."

"And why would you do a thing like that? I'm sure Sasori-sama has his hands full with Deidara right now, and you don't want to be on the wrong end of one of his clay bombs." The medic's reaction was so believable that for one, brief moment, Kakashi could have honestly said that he thought that he wasn't just talking to a figment of his shattered psyche. (Because he knew his mental state was going downhill very fast. Kakashi wasn't a genius for nothing.) Kabuto could have been right there, running alongside him through the streets, looking for a black cloak with red

clouds.

"I need to see him. About... you."

"Why? I'm long gone. There's nothing more to discuss about me. You're only going to get yourself killed if you see him, you coward. Sasori-sama never liked you. You know that."

"If I have to, I'll fight him," he fielded.

Because Kakashi didn't want to admit it to even himself. He knew he was going to die if he saw Sasori. But Kabuto wouldn't like it if he just gave up, so he was going to fight. He would fight for all he was worth. And he'd still die. Simple as that. He'd killed too many, seen too much, lost too many to live any longer.

"You can't win, and you know it. You're a coward, a coward!" Kabuto sang, snickering at his expense. *"I can believe how desperate and pathetic you are, Kakashi. If you could only see yourself right now... running away, of all things! I thought that maybe you'd grow a spine if I died, but I guess I was wrong."*

"Damn it, Kabuto! This whole war has been a hell for me—you—us! The only reason Konoha even retaliated was because of our insufferable pride! We knew we couldn't win! This was just one last gesture, so that the Leaf can die with its head held high. It's a shinobi's suicide. A mass suicide!"

In his mind, Kabuto was quiet, probably sulking. Kakashi grimly kept on his quest for the puppet master, effortlessly killing anyone who stood in his way. He was fairly certain that one of them had even been a Suna-nin.

Then, finally, he passed a half-broken puppet.

He knew he was getting close.

Kakashi skidded around the corner of a building, and then found Sasori locked in hand-to-hand combat with Temari. Or at least that puppet of his was fighting her. But Sasori had to be close if he was still controlling it.

At his arrival, both Temari and the puppet turned to look at him, relief washing over the blonde kunoichi's face. "Oh, Kakashi-san! Thank the gods!"

Then, several things happened at once. A shadow passed overhead, and if Kakashi hadn't been staring at the ground, he wouldn't have caught on that it was bird-shaped. The puppet suddenly backed up, and went limp. Kakashi felt himself jerked backwards by his vest, just as Deidara jumped down from his bird and landed squarely on the back of the puppet. He crossed his arms and looked down at Temari with a wicked grin on his face. "Hi, yeah."

Kakashi was pulled back around the corner of the building just as an explosion sounded. He was turned to face Sasori, in person this time. "...I hadn't thought you would actually come to see me."

"You said you'd show me his mission reports," he replied dispassionately. "And then, as a Konoha shinobi, I plan on killing you."

Sasori's mouth curved upward in a smile that was oddly reminiscent of Kabuto's as a child. Maybe that's where he had picked it up, before he started suppressing his facial expressions more. "I see. ...In that case, come this way."

Sasori left his partner and Temari in the street, and led him back in the direction he'd just come. They continued at a walking pace, and it irritated Kakashi to no end.

"He's doing it just to annoy you. He likes to do that." Kabuto said idly, smirking. The smirk, at least, was completely different than anyone else's. That was Kabuto's expression alone. The smile, however, was still similar enough to keep Kakashi off-balance.

The Copy-nin didn't deem that worthy of an answer, and so he just kept following the Akatsuki member. Soon, he realized where they were headed: the Akatsuki tower. The fire was mostly out, though it was still smoldering. Sasori scowled at this, muttering, "I can't believe those idiots set fire to the tower..."

Kakashi didn't want to point out that he'd nearly been caught in that fire.

"Wait here. Don't get killed until I get back." Sasori jumped up into one of the open windows, vanishing into the building. Kakashi looked around on the street, but it seemed deserted. Except for all of the bodies everywhere. And the scent of fire was irritating his nose. He shifted from foot to foot, for want of something else to do as he waited.

Sasori came back about ten minutes later, holding a thick stack of papers. He very nearly threw them at Kakashi, looking sour. The white-haired jounin almost eagerly—no, *desperately*—snatched them up, riffling through them. This was undoubtedly Kabuto's handwriting, from different dates of different years. And thank *god* for the Sharingan. He'd only have to read them once and he'd always remember them.

They must have made an odd picture, sitting on the roof of the charred tower. Kakashi studying the papers in front of him, taking it all in with his Sharingan. Sasori sitting beside him, looking up at the overcast clouds, swinging his legs over the edge of the roof. It seemed absurdly normal. And precisely for that they were completely out of place in this war-torn village.

At least everyone left them alone. No one wanted to get near anyone in an Akatsuki uniform right then.

It only took twenty minutes for him to read through over a decade's worth of mission reports. And now they were all seared into his memory, every word that Kabuto had written. It was quite visible, the difference that the mind-control jutsu had on his writing style and the information given. Kakashi wondered if Sasori had caught on to that, and if so, why he didn't do anything. Or maybe he did, but Kabuto still won out in the end. There were just so many things about Kabuto he *still* wouldn't know... and probably never would.

"Going to kill me now?" Sasori asked politely, still staring at the sky.

Kakashi set the stack of papers between them. He'd love to keep them, but it wouldn't be very practical, carrying them around for the rest of this war. "Yes."

"You're about five months too late, if you actually wanted to have stood a chance." There was that Kabuto-like smile again.

"He's doing that to upset you. I picked it up from him, but he stopped smiling like that once I did. He's only doing it because he knows it reminds you of me." Kabuto informed him, smiling in the exact same manner. *"Don't let it get to you."*

"That would put that roughly back at the Suna disaster."

"Yes."

"So it's true, what Sakura said."

"She told you about that?" Sasori only sounded mildly interested. Of course he wouldn't muster up any more concern than that; he'd made sure that she died in the first wave. Kakashi frowned darkly; Sasori was, in one way or another, responsible for the death of *two* of his students.

But if he expanded that, to the entire Akatsuki, then they were responsible for Naruto, Sakura, Gaara, even *Kabuto*. Because if Orochimaru hadn't come into the picture, yes, Kabuto would still have his mental collar on, but at least he wouldn't have fought with Kakashi that last time, and he wouldn't have been resurrected. It was really entirely the Akatsuki's fault, then. The only one of them who stood a chance now was Sasuke. And that's *if* he didn't get his way and fight Itachi.

The Akatsuki had really just successfully killed the Leaf. And at least crippled the Sand and Cloud, and indirectly the Mist. Iwa seemed to be the only untouched village, and he had to wonder how long *that* would last.

The world was headed to hell. But at least Kakashi would beat it there.

"Aren't you going to kill me now?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, I had been thinking about what a cruel world this is."

"Save your breath, because I already know. You can tell Kabuto all about it when you're both together again."

"I won't die." Even to his own ears, it sounded thin and pitifully clearly a lie. But, of course, Kakashi *had* to fight him. He was the last one alive who had any connection to Kabuto, and he was in the Akatsuki. It was only fitting.

Still sitting on the roof, Kakashi grabbed his wrist, trying to channel his chakra into it. Maybe he had one *Chidori* left in him... He felt the chakra sparkle and crackle to life, forming into raw electricity, encompassing his entire hand. A loud chirping sound filled the air, and beside him, Sasori calmly stood up and dusted off his uniform.

"Let's get this over with, shall we?"

At least he wasn't smiling anymore.

-.-.-

The good news was that Suigetsu had lost Samehada when Kisame came back with a vengeance. The bad news was that he still had Momochi Zabuza's old sword. Which was just as lethal, just without the chakra-eating aspect.

But the best news was that Kisame took over his fight with Suigetsu. So Neji was free to find Hinata. He knew she and one of the Taki twins—or rather, the remaining one—were fighting Juugo. And he did *not* like that idea. Juugo was massive, and neither Hinata nor the Taki-nin were particularly large for their respective ages. And plus, there was no telling what the man actually *did*. Deidara was one thing, but a Taki chuunin? Quite another. Neji wanted her to have a bodyguard a bit tougher than that. Preferably himself. (Though in lieu of himself, usually he would accept an Akatsuki member.)

Neji looked in the onsen building, but it was empty, aside from bodies and hot water. Which wasn't good. One or two were floating *in* the water, but he couldn't identify them without getting closer. And no telling what was hiding in that dimly-lit building, waiting for unwary ninja.

"Hinata!" Neji bellowed, activating his bloodline limit. Aside from the occasional high-speed flickers of one of the fighting shinobi, it was all dead bodies. *She must have moved on*, he thought hopefully, tearing his eyes from the two bodies floating in the water.

He ran down the street, and eventually living bodies came into view. None of them seemed familiar, though he couldn't be for sure who they were. So he kept his Byakugan on the primary layer, the one that didn't go deep enough to see chakra. A lot of dead bodies, still. At least a lot of them had Konoha or Suna hitai-ates.

The first familiar face he found was Deidara.

The second was Gaara.

The third was what had been Temari at one point.

Shinobi were never meant to be resurrected. Of course, Gaara and Kabuto had been the only examples of this in their lifetime, and neither of them had ended prettily to begin with. Moreover, the psychological aspect of both the victim and the initial murderer's minds afterward... the minds were probably messier than the village was right then.

Neji could easily see what had happened here. Deidara was fighting Temari, and killed her with a bomb, by the looks of it. Gaara had noticed this somewhere along the line, and had either come to try to save her or for revenge. Deidara, having already killed the Kazekage once before, promptly snapped.

And that resulted in the scene he found.

Sand was scattered all around the scene, lifeless and unmoving. There was also blood and bits of tissue lining the walls of the alley, in addition to scorch marks. Temari's body was lying against one wall, or what was left of her body. Most of it was gone, aside from one arm, shoulder and her head, which was lolling against said shoulder, her mouth and eyes wide open and empty. One of her—it *might* have been hers, Neji couldn't be certain—legs was on the opposite building's roof, teetering on the edge. The rest of her was splattered on the walls, including splinters of her fan.

Gaara was still relatively in one piece. Granted, one of his arms was lying by his sister, but that was probably revenge for Deidara losing his arm during their previous fight. It had been cauterized sloppily, probably from a bomb's blast. Deidara was sitting on the rest of Gaara's body, repeatedly beating his head against the concrete below them. Blood and brain tissue was splattered and dripping out of the broken skull onto the ground and the wall. From the looks of his hands, he'd already punched him until his knuckles were bloody.

Neji tried not to throw up, and instead just delicately covered his nose, trying to protect himself from the overwhelming stench of blood in the alleyway. He picked his way over to Deidara, who was *still* beating the corpse's head against the ground. As he neared, he could hear the blonde artist hissing under his breath. "Die, die, I'll kill you again, die, stay out of my nightmares, bastard, die, die, die, *why won't you die?!*"

Neji suddenly realized that he could very well get killed just for being in the same vicinity as the psychotic Akatsuki member, but he was his best link to Hinata. Plus obviously he had to be talked down before he incinerated half the village or something.

"Deidara," he said loudly, still a few good feet away, in case he had to make a break for it. The blonde's shoulders froze and tensed up, but he didn't turn around.

"Why won't he *die*?" Deidara asked quietly.

"Deidara, Gaara is dead. He is. And he's not coming back this time." Neji said carefully, taking a cautious step forward.

"He—He said he'd kill me." Neji didn't doubt that. "I had a dream. Nightmare. He said he'd kill me, because you can't kill demons, but I did! Why didn't he just *stay dead*?" Deidara turned and looked at him. His expression was perfectly calm and blank, though the blood splattered across his cheek and dripping off of his headband answered any questions about his mental health right then. Worse, it appeared that Gaara hadn't gone down without a fight; he was covered in scrapes, gashes and all sorts of minor injuries that would probably get infected if he didn't get the sand out of them.

"Gaara is dead. The Ichibi is sealed. You did that, remember? Neither of them are going to kill you. No one's going to kill you, so why don't you just drop him and—"

"Where's Bya-chan?" Finally, a lucid thought. Even if he had to interrupt him to say it. Deidara looked around, even up at the sky, and Neji rolled his eyes. He hadn't had to deal with trauma of this kind since he'd had to calm down a chuunin with his first kill on one of his missions in Konoha. *Years* ago. And he had just never really been the comforting, calming type, anyway.

"I don't know where she is. Can you help me find her?"

"She could get killed. Do you know where Sasori-danna is?"

"No, I don't."

"They both could get killed."

"Yes, they could. We should probably find them." If all else failed, finding Sasori would either calm Deidara down or give him a suitable distraction.

Just then, however, they both suddenly felt a surge of electricity in the air. Overhead, lighting rumbled, and then a *huge* lightning strike came down and hit the ground just down the street. The aftershock could be felt even where they were. Then, another bolt came down, closer this time.

"Damn it!" Deidara stood up, finally getting off of the cadaver, and was angrily walking towards Neji. The Hyuuga stepped aside, and let the blonde go on his rampage. "Kakuzu! Would you stop making your fucking jutsus so close to us?!"

"Screw you!" came the far-off reply.

And just like that, Deidara was cured of his trauma, thanks to another life-threatening incident due to the Akatsuki. Neji shook his head in disbelief. And he'd thought *jounin* had been eccentric... Akatsuki must surely be a new rank, above them, like the Kage. They went beyond strange. "So about, er, 'Bya-chan'."

"You lost her, yeah?" Deidara leaned against the nearest wall, wiping the blood off his hands onto his pants. What couldn't be wiped off was simply licked off.

"Not really. She was fighting Juugo with one of the Taki twins and then she just vanished."

Overhead, thunder rumbled, and they instinctively ducked. "What's a Juugo, yeah?"

"Sasuke and his team are here. Juugo is one of them. The tall one."

"Ohh... then we should probably find her fast. Wait—you let her *fight* him?!" Deidara whirled around on him so fast it was surprising that he didn't faint from dizziness. Neji blinked in surprise, eyebrows raising.

"Hardly. Do you think I would do something so *stupid*? If you Akatsuki-nin hadn't been off sealing the Kyuubi, then she wouldn't have had to do such a thing. We were severely understaffed as it was." He didn't want to add that she was lucky that she at least had a partner to fight with. Deidara was already unstable, and his unhealthy attachment to Hinata could be more of a disadvantage than a benefit right then.

The blonde was already digging clay out of his pouch, holding up a fist-sized owl before Neji finished his clarification.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Hinata wanders around aimlessly, trying to avoid fighting any more than necessary. After rescuing an Akatsuki member, it somehow winds up that she needs rescuing—from a dead person. How does that work? Kakashi and Sasori duke it out, with less than favorable results for either party. At least the voices in his head have stopped... And outmanned and outmaneuvered, Pein is forced to make a desperate decision to save his village. Or the remains of it.

The End of The Last Great Shinobi War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata had found out that, even if she was a Hyuuga, maybe absorbing the chakra of someone like Juugo wasn't the best idea. It was making her somewhat dizzy, and occasionally her Cursed Seal gave a painful throb. It probably didn't like adjusting to a completely new chakra. She had a new respect for the Branch house, though.

Even with the mild handicap, Hinata had killed Juugo. He was with Sasuke; he had to be at least in his skill range. True, she slew him with a bit of help, but did it mean she was improving? If she was being honest with herself, she couldn't just say yes. She had only ever killed one person—and she *thought* he died, at least—completely by herself. Otherwise, she'd always had help of some sort.

Her confidence was further boosted when she had the opportunity to save an Akatsuki member, for the second or third time in her life. Only this time, it wasn't Deidara (or Itachi). It was Hidan.

He'd been completely shredded by someone or something, and she had stumbled across him quite accidentally. Literally. Of course, he didn't particularly appreciate being tripped over, and began yelling hoarsely at her.

Eventually she ended up carrying his head in her arms, the headless, one-armed body limping along behind her like some kind of sick puppy. "Who did this to you?" she asked quietly, stopping in the street when they came across his missing arm.

"Some Suna asshole. Like I give a damn. All I know is that I need to find Kakuzu this fucking minute or else I'm gonna rip someone's throat out. With my teeth, if Jashin-sama would permit." he said, and then nodded—as well as just a head could—towards the arm. "Well, pick it up, will ya? I'm not just gonna leave it there for it to get lost among the rest of the limbs lying around."

The last thing Hinata wanted to do was to pick up a severed arm, but Hidan was eyeing her reproachfully, and she was acutely aware of how close he was to her throat. With a sickened whimper, she bent down, and, looking away, picked up the appendage with the barest minimum of her skin touching it. Surprisingly, it was still quite warm to the touch, though thankfully it didn't move. Apparently Hidan couldn't control his body very well when he wasn't connected with said body.

"Let's get going, then! I need to find Kakuzu."

"W-With my help, of course..."

"Yeah yeah, whatever. Like I give a shit. Considering it paying homage to Jashin-sama, helping me out here."

The upside of carrying around bloody, detached body parts was that people left her alone.

The unlikely pair walked at a sedate pace through the streets. Overhead, thunder rumbled in the clouds, and lightning struck a far-off part of the city. A moment later, it did again. It must have been some sort of jutsu. And then, as if the lightning had summoned it, the clouds above them opened up and dumped a torrent of rain upon the village.

"Bout time..." Hidan muttered, rolling his scarlet eyes.

In the darkness, neither of them saw the shadow that crossed the cobbled street just in front of them, and then circled around for a second time.

-.-.-

Sasori jumped guiltily when a large, clay bird promptly dropped out of the air beside him. Its wings caught itself and its two passengers at the last moment with a flap, which nearly knocked him off balance. He looked up in annoyance at Deidara and the Hyuuga—and then did a double-take, because that was *not* Hinata.

Oh, lovely. Deidara had lost her again. No telling what he'd do now.

"Sasori-danna!" he crowed triumphantly, slipping off of the owl's back like a slide. Neji got down with a bit more dignity. "You're okay—you're covered in blood." Deidara had practically pounced on him, but let go a moment later as he came to this realization.

"You're one to talk. What have you done? It looks like you've put someone's head through a blender and dumped that all over yourself." Sasori remarked shrewdly, stepping forward to close the gap that his partner had just created. He started doing a check-up on the blonde, yanking him down to eye-level to do so.

"It's not mine. Most of it isn't, anyway, yeah. But what about you?"

"Oh, this isn't mine, either." Sasori lied easily. As he turned Deidara around to see if the burns on his shoulder were serious, he spat out a mouthful of blood, just so the mutinous stuff wouldn't drip down onto his chin. Neji noticed, but wisely didn't say anything. "I was just fighting the Copy-nin."

"...Oh."

"While you two are chatting, may I borrow the bird? I'd still like to find Hinata." Neji said quickly, though Sasori was still curious about Deidara's little 'oh'.

"No—I'm coming with, yeah. Sasori-danna, have you see Bya-chan?"

"No, and I assume that you are going to drag me along with you until she is found, am I correct?" Deidara's grin was all the reply he needed. "No. I am not going on another one of your flying mud monstrosities just to be bucked off, thrown off, or kicked off."

"But—"

"Furthermore, I have more important matters to take care of than searching for a missing princess. Unlike you two, I am actually *fighting* this war." Sasori didn't miss how Neji and Deidara looked at each other in flat disbelief. "I know it's going to be wrapped up soon, but I haven't killed anyone in a long time, and it's about time I caught up with Kakuzu's record. Now, if you two will excuse me, I'm off to more slaughter. ...Though instead of riding on your stupid little bird, you could just look for her manually. Like, I don't know, down the street. ...She just turned a corner and left."

Sasori swore that the two used a *Shunshin* to disappear so quickly. He shrugged and went back to

his work of trying to drag Kakashi's limp body off of the roof without damaging it too much more. He had always wanted a puppet with the Sharingan, and even if it was just one eye, he'd take what he could get. Moreover, he'd just done Kakashi a huge favor; he could return that, even like this.

"You're welcome, you little Leaf bastard. Both of you." he muttered under his breath.

-.-.-

The shadow wasn't actually circling back. In fact, there were two.

Hinata promptly got ambushed by both knight and dragon, accidentally dropping Hidan's head and arm as she stumbled forward to try to catch herself.

"There you are, yeah!"

"Where have you been?"

"Why do you have Hidan?"

"What happened to Juugo?"

"Hey! Bitch, pick me back up!"

She felt blindsided by the sudden attention, and was working on trying to pry both Neji and Deidara off of her without dying of embarrassment or Hidan's headless killer intent. Deidara, she could understand. Used to, even. But Neji? He'd never just ran up and hugged her before. Maybe he was just competing with Deidara?

Finally extracting herself, the dark-haired kunoichi stooped down and picked the immortal's head and arm back up, mumbling some half-hearted apology. Straightening again, she took a deep breath and started answering their questions. "I've been wandering around, looking for you guys or for someone else. I have Hidan-san because I found him dismembered on a street corner a little while ago and I wanted to help him."

"For the good of Jashin-sama! He repays his believers and those who help them!" Hidan added proudly.

She smiled uncertainly, wondering if he meant that she was finally freed from his religion. "And... Juugo is dead."

"What's a Juugo, yeah?"

"You killed him?" Needless to say, Neji's question was the more serious of the two. Partly because of his personality, but mostly because he actually knew who the massive man was. Hinata nodded, blushing. Though for once, it was because she was pleased. Shinobi were taught to be proud of their kills.

"Well... okay then, yeah." Deidara said uneasily, clearly at a loss with this conversation. "Come on, Bya-chan."

"Huh?" Seriousness and self-esteem gone, she blinked in surprise. "Come where?"

"You certainly aren't staying out here," he replied, raising his visible eyebrow. "Even if you killed a Juugo, yeah. It's dangerous out here, and Sasori-danna said I might have to use my C4. I don't want you anywhere near that."

Her brow furrowed. "Where else would I possibly stay?"

That's how Hinata and Hidan's armless, headless body, his arm, and his head found themselves back in the cave that they had performed the last sealing in. "For fuck's sake! I just got out of this hellhole!"

Hinata sighed, hanging her head. Men were impossible. Give them an inch, and they took a mile. She shouldn't have asked where they'd put her... "Is there any way out?"

"Not any way that I know of, without Leader-sama getting his ass in here to break us out."

She sighed again, and sat down. Might as well get comfortable. Looks like they'd be here a long time. Hopefully someone would remember to release them after the fighting was over... She looked around, spotting the somewhat charred remains of what was either a Doton or Pein's sealing jutsu. It was almost certainly the latter. The tang of chakra was still fairly palpable in the air.

It was very dark in the cave, with almost no light. The only light source, it seemed, was a small crack in the corner that a snake couldn't have squeezed through. Hinata rolled her eyes; she wouldn't be getting out *that* way. She really was stuck in here. At least she had company.

Then, as her white eyes adjusted to the darkness, she picked up something that was... odd. Out of place. It was dark-colored, though bits and pieces of it seemed lighter than its blackened majority. As Hidan was swearing his unattached lungs out, Hinata got up, dusted off her pants, and wandered over.

About halfway to the object, she figured out what it was.

Her heart nearly stopped then and there, but she made herself keep walking. As she passed Hidan's head, he started shouting at her instead of humanity in general. "Hey! Where the hell do you think *you're* going, huh? What's over there? What the fuck is that thing over there? Hey, I wanna see; bring me over! Hey, bitch, I'm talking to *you*!"

The kunoichi ignored him. Her steps were uncertain on the dark, rocky ground below, though she couldn't chalk it up to that. Ninja were as surefooted as mountain goats. (At least, they were supposed to be.) She *knew* what that was... and yet she kept walking towards it.

Until, soon enough, Hinata was staring down at the body of Uzumaki Naruto.

-.-.-

Pein was thinking.

And when Pein thought, bad things happened.

Just like now.

His Akatsuki were wreaking havoc upon the city and whoever they came across. Keeping watch

with his remaining bodies—he kept meaning to track down some suitable new ones—he knew for a fact that both Konoha and Suna were suffering heavy losses.

But, when he was counting their losses, he was trying to keep track of his own men. It seemed that Sasuke and his team had just cut a swath through the village and anyone who stood in his way to get to Midori. And now Midori was dead.

Damn, he thought sullenly. She had been a good Rain Lord. Loyal, at least. If a bit clingy sometimes... Now he'd have to get another one. Not to mention that it meant he'd have to execute Daisuke, too. And here he was doing *such* a good job keeping Sasuke busy...

His options weren't particularly high in number.

Choice one: continue the way things were. Eventually everyone would kill each other and that would be the end of that. It was definitely the most time consuming, though.

Choice two: just send in his Akatsuki and recall as many Ame-nin as he could. But, of course, a full retreat would definitely tip-off the enemy, so it would be time consuming to try to play hide-and-seek with the survivors to try to kill them off. Plus, he had no idea how to successfully recall all of his Ame-nin practically.

Choice three: recall his Ame-nin and send Deidara in with a carpet bombing. Keep the Akatsuki out of the direct fighting, and even if it meant leveling even *more* buildings, at least it'd be sure to kill everyone.

The hardest part was, however, trying to figure out which choice would produce the least casualties on his side. And how to recall his own men? He didn't want a single Konoha or Suna bastard getting away from this battle, and a full-scale retreat would only serve to give them a head start.

If only he had a way to contact *only* his men... maybe if they passed it by word of mouth? It might take awhile, but it'd probably be the safest and stealthiest way. If no one was forgotten...

"Konan."

"Hmm?" She looked up at him, not looking particularly interested. She had been lost in thought, more than likely. Pein had noticed that his partner had been doing that quite often these days, when she wasn't having nightmares or in immediate danger.

"Get me the members who are out fighting."

"Will do." Konan raised an arm, and a few fingers and part of her sleeve dissolved into sheets of paper, folding themselves into butterflies. Pein hastily turned off his drizzle, just in time; the butterflies flew out into the village, heedless of the rain. None of them went down, thankfully. Konan would always get irritable when one of her papers was caught in his rain.

If his Akatsuki spread the word, it would hopefully frighten the other ninja away as well. That should cause enough confusion to cover most of the retreat. Maybe. And if not... maybe he'd have to put up with a few more casualties than he'd like. All wars required sacrifice, after all.

"Make that ASAP."

Ten minutes later, most of the Akatsuki was assembled in front of him. Hidan and Sasori were both missing. Neither of their partners, however, seemed particularly concerned. "What is this about?" Itachi asked quietly. Most of the others seemed just as curious.

"Spread the word. *Only* to Ame-nin, though. Got that? I want a full retreat, but I don't want the other side alerted until the last possible moment, if we can help it. Only to Ame-nin. In a half-hour, I want them all out of the village, near the opening of our sealing chamber." Pein commanded. Most of the members nodded, and moved to disperse. The leader stepped forward, catching Deidara on the shoulder before he could flee. "Not you."

"...Is something wrong, yeah?" Deidara asked guardedly. Pein smirked at his caution.

"What's the strongest level of bomb you have, Deidara?"

The blonde relaxed, smiling slightly at the familiar territory. "Right now, C4 level. Karura, yeah."

"It... has a name?" Konan asked mildly, folding her hands in front of her stomach. Deidara nodded.

"I take it you want me to bomb the village, right? Then you want me to use Karura. I *think* I can make one large enough to cover the entire village, yeah..." He half-turned from them, overlooking the ruined Amegakure. He held out his hands where the village walls were, muttering some measurements under his breath.

"Why would I want you to use Karura?" Pein asked in amusement. Assumptions he usually got from his older members, but this was the first time he'd gotten something so audacious from Deidara. He was still (relatively) the baby of the organization.

"Well, I could use a C3. I could use just a few bombs and completely level the city, perfectly, yeah. There wouldn't be anything left standing." Pein nodded as Deidara continued with his explanation. Konan watched with slight interest at the passivity of her partner. "*But*, if I use Karura, then there won't be a single living thing left in the vicinity."

"Isn't... that what bombs are *supposed* to do?" the leader asked skeptically.

Deidara grinned gleefully. "Yes, of course, yeah! Would I adopt anything less than that as my art? But the beauty of my little Karura-chan is that it only kills organic things. Humans, animals, insects. Anything with a respiratory system dies immediately, yeah. It's *amazing*! See, I make a big bomb, but it's really just a cover, because when it explodes then it turns into a bunch of microscopic bombs, and—"

"Why didn't I know about this sooner?" Pein demanded. He wasn't really angry; he was more lamenting the fact at how many lives he could have saved in the Konoha side of the war if he'd just sent Deidara in with a Karura or two.

"Uhh... You didn't ask?" Deidara looked away guiltily.

Pein cuffed him upside the head. But he was still having too much fun imagining what kind of mass destruction that could cause without hurting anything more than it had to, to be *really* angry. The perfect bomb. The Iwa artist rubbed his head, scowling at the leader.

"Right. In a half-hour, you go in with a Karura. And then if you see any non-Ame survivors that didn't get caught in the blast, just bomb them normally."

Deidara gave a mock salute. "Will do, sir, yeah. Can I go now?"

"Sure, sure." He rolled his eyes, amazed at how such an idiot could have gotten into his organization. Then he remembered that he'd picked him.

"Na... Naruto... kun..."

Of *course* they would have left the body in here. Of course they would. They had better things to do, like saving the village, than to take care of one little body. Still, Hinata felt blindsided.

Yes, she knew that Naruto had the Kyuubi inside of him. He'd *used* it on her, for god's sake. And she knew that the Akatsuki had wanted all nine demons. That would naturally include her (ex-)crush. Hinata knew all along that if the Akatsuki won, it meant Naruto—and the entire Leaf village—would lose. They would die. Somehow she'd just ignored that fact for the past year.

Yes, she'd seen the carnage of Konoha in the war. She'd been captured by the ANBU that had once protected her own Hokage. Her own father had placed the Cursed Seal on her. Kakashi had attacked her. Shikamaru had wanted to kill her. She was the Leaf's enemy now, and now always would be.

But it didn't mean she liked it.

She had seen her friends die. But they would have died anyway, if the Akatsuki had attacked. Surely one little Hyuuga wouldn't have played that big of a role in this arms race.

But it hadn't just been her. Neji and Sasuke had both defected as well after her. And Kurenai had died. Would those four people be enough to tip the scales in the Akatsuki's favor? Would three jounin and a chuunin have made that much of a difference in the grand scheme of things?

Regardless, Hinata would *not* sit there and think of what ifs all day. Not when the result of her defection was staring up at her with lifeless, blue eyes. These weren't red eyes; they were blue. They were Naruto's eyes. Not the Kyuubi's.

Slowly, Hinata sunk to her knees, kneeling in front of Naruto's body. Hidan was still yelling at her, halfway across the cavern, but she easily tuned him out. With shaking hands, she reached out and touched his face. It was cool to the touch, but not quite cold. After all, he hadn't been dead that long. If she closed her eyes and so wished, Hinata could pretend that he was still alive...

"Oh... Naruto-kun... I'm so sorry," she whispered, leaning over his body. She hesitantly wrapped her arms around his shoulders, hauling him up halfway onto her lap. Hinata brushed a few stray locks of blonde hair out of his eyes, and then closed his eyes for him. "I-I'm so sorry, Naruto-kun. I'm sorry that this h-had to happen to you. You... you didn't deserve it."

Capturing the Bijuu and keeping them from tearing apart any more villages was certainly an admirable thing. Midori had told her so. But these weren't just demons. They were people. Kids, like her. Naruto had only been a few months older than her. Gaara had been about the same age as well. And that girl from Kumo who had the Nibi inside of her, she couldn't have been older than twenty. Was it right to sacrifice these people who hadn't *wanted* to become Jinchuuriki, just to stop war? Just for one village to triumph over all others?

"Hey, what's that?" Hinata jumped when she heard the voice. She nearly dropped Naruto, and hastily hugged him close to her chest to ignore her racing heart. She turned to look over one shoulder. Hidan had somehow made his headless way over to a few feet from her, and was peering shrewdly at the body she was hugging. "Isn't that the Kyuubi bastard? Well, I guess he's not the Kyuubi anymore, but same shit regardless."

"He-He's not a bastard, and he's not the Kyuubi. Naruto-kun never was." Hinata replied primly, turning her back to Hidan once more. The immortal snorted, and she could tell that he was probably rolling his eyes. It felt somewhat... sacrilegious to have Hidan here, making light of Naruto's death. (Then again, everything about Hidan was sacrilegious, so that was probably superfluous at that point.) "Please... just go away."

"Aww, did the little bitch have a crush on the demon bastard?" Hidan cooed, snickering. "I thought you'd be glad, like everyone else, that there's no more demons. But oh well, I guess I was wrong. I'm sure Jashin-sama will take pity on both your souls, even if they were heathen and you're not glad that the fucking demons are gone."

"He wasn't the Kyuubi!" Hinata said in a high voice, turning to face him with a vicious snarl. Hidan blinked in surprise. "He was a determined, ambitious, courageous, remarkable young man who was going to be the next Hokage! He... He was just cursed by having that d-demon inside of him..." Why was she defending him? The last time they'd seen each other, he had attacked her. With the intent to *kill*.

But *that* had been the Kyuubi. Red eyes and all. Red eyes meant the Kyuubi; blue meant Naruto. Simple as that. And now with the demon fox sealed once and for all, he would only ever be Naruto. Even if he had hurt her, attacked her even, Naruto was a good being. She still admired him. The crush had passed, but the respect and devotion that came with it were still there.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Naruto-kun. I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you..." she whispered, low enough that even Hidan couldn't hear. The severed head looked annoyed, but for once, had the tact not to continue the argument. It was confusing enough without a second opinion.

Hinata hated the Kyuubi. She'd always hated it. And for a brief, brief moment, she had hated Naruto when she found out the truth. But she could never hate him just because of that, at least not in the long run. Naruto was still her Naruto. And Pein had the Kyuubi now, so she wouldn't ever have to worry about it again. It'd just taken a fourth shinobi war to acquire it. A fourth shinobi war and the life of all who'd died for their villages, and the life of one ill-fated boy.

"I'm so sorry..." Hinata whispered one last time, leaning down and pressing her lips against Naruto's cold ones. A kiss goodbye. "I'll make sure you are buried properly, Naruto-kun."

-.-.-

Everyone had been notified about the evacuation. At least, everyone they could find. The injured had already been moved, too, so now all that remained was those still fighting and about five minutes. Ninja were beginning to wrap up their fights, stealthily slipping into the shadows for the withdrawal.

All except for a few.

"Can you get her from here?"

"Yeah, if you would *quit asking*."

"Well I was just wondering. No reason to get all huffy."

"Huffy? I'll show you huffy—"

"Would you two please quit arguing?!" Deidara hissed. Pein and Konan innocently stopped their bickering, glancing to their right at the irate blonde. He crossed his arms, glaring sulkily over the edge of the building.

"...Right." Pein said, then turned back to Konan. "And you're sure you can get her from here?"

"For—yes, Pein! I can! And if you would stop asking me every five seconds then maybe I could concentrate on trying to get her in my sights." she burst out in a fierce whisper, clenching her hands into fists. The leader scooted away rather nervously. Konan leaned her head on her arm, the other reaching out over the edge of the roof to trace her arrow's trajectory.

Deidara had patiently waited through her explanation of her little trick, but he couldn't stand their arguing. It was annoying. And they thought he and Sasori argued? Ha! That was nothing compared to *them*. But he was stuck with them until they were finished taking out the main targets, to free up the remaining Ame-nin. After all, Pein would have to be the one to tell him when to start the bombing.

"It's just surprising. I'd never thought that this little parlor trick of yours could serve as anything..." the leader replied petulantly.

Konan elbowed him roughly in the ribs. "That's because you've never given me a chance to demonstrate! I'm always the *messenger*. 'Do this, Konan!' Or, 'watch over Kisame, Konan!' Maybe you would be so surprised about your own damn partner if you'd let me *do* something once in awhile!"

Deidara wished that the leader would just learn his lesson and be done with it; never argue with your partner. Especially if she's pregnant. Pein shrugged. Apparently such a 'god' had never taken anything other than his own skills as anything more than parlor tricks. Deidara, at least, thought it was kind of cool.

She would roll up a piece of paper until it resembled an oversized dart, and then shoot it with some kind of paper-shooting-jutsu. (That part was still a bit hazy to him.) In mid-flight, it would unroll, and if she wished, fold into something else. Mostly, however, she just unrolled it and had the thin piece of paper slice cleanly through the target's neck, in the cleanest decapitation Deidara had ever seen. And, also creating flying things, he could really appreciate how much she'd have to practice and measure in order to change something's shape mid-flight.

Right now, they were trying—key word would be *trying*—to take out a redheaded kunoichi who wasn't sporting any hitai-ate. They just knew that she wasn't one of theirs. Pein said something about her being on Sasuke's team, but Deidara didn't care. He just wanted to see if he could create a village-sized Karura, damn it!

"...Are you gonna shoot her or not?"

"Shut up, Pein! Yes, I can, but she's behaving too—predictably."

"And that's... bad...?"

"Yes! When, in your life, has any enemy ever behaved predictably?"

"Maybe we finally got lucky."

"Just shoot, yeah! If you miss, you miss. It's not that hard of a decision." Deidara interrupted yet again. Things weren't looking good for his masterpiece at this rate.

Konan shrugged minutely, and then let the paper arrow fly. It unrolled halfway there, turning into a razor-sharp blade. The red-haired kunoichi below smoothly danced out of the way, just in time. A bit of her hair was cut off, but it missed her neck perfectly. She hadn't batted an eye behind her glasses. "Shit. See? She knows we're up here."

"How? I'm using a genjutsu that not even Itachi could see through."

"I doubt that..." Deidara hissed under his breath, looking away. "Just let me go down there and kill her, yeah!"

"Karin!" Below them, the fight was broken up when another shinobi skidded into the scene. Deidara instantly recognized this one; the pale-haired swordsman from Kiri. Suigetsu. The blonde grinned, already halfway to his feet. He had a few choice words—and then some—to say to that man. Pein dragged him back down, sighing.

The redheaded kunoichi, Karin, looked up at her teammate's arrival. "What is it? I'm kind of busy here!" She gestured to the confused Ame-nin opposite her.

"Sasuke-kun says we have to pull back now. Juugo's already dead, and he's pissed about that." Suigetsu gave the Ame-nin a sharp-toothed smile, and his victim took a few steps backward hesitantly.

"Why should we? Sasuke-kun isn't even done with *his* fight yet. And he hasn't even gotten to Itachi! Go talk to him and then come back for me."

"No. We have to go *now*." Suigetsu said firmly, grabbing her hand. He no less than *dragged* her down the street, out of sight.

Deidara stood up, wiping his hands on his pants. "Well, now that *that's* taken care of, we can just toast the whole village, yeah. It'll be a lot easier if they're still here."

"No..." Konan also stood up, groaning as her back popped. "Stupid kid..." she muttered, then raised her voice. "Didn't you see that girl? Karin? Her legs were bloody and she was walking with a strong limp. She had been injured before. And yet she *still* dodged my attack. That wasn't luck; she knew we were here. That white-haired guy probably did as well."

Deidara shook his head. "No, Suigetsu's strong suit is *not* genjutsu, yeah. That's why he follows around Sasuke. They probably really do have some other crisis on their hands."

"Maybe it's been leaked about our bombing." said Pein quietly.

"Even so," the Iwa-nin grinned evilly, "I'll still track them down, yeah. I haven't gotten to burn a city in *ages*. Let alone one with permission!"

"Then go for it. The half hour is up. Once we're clear, use your Karura or whatever."

For Deidara, Christmas had just come early.

--.-

"What are you two doing in here?" Sasori was immensely surprised when he found none other than

Hidan and Hinata in the sealing chamber. Especially Hidan's body, which was missing its head and arm.

The dark-haired girl looked up guiltily, standing up hastily and wringing her hands. "N-Nothing—I-I mean—Deidara-kun just put us in here!" she cried quickly, passing the blame.

Of course, the puppeteer thought. None other than his partner would think to put these two in the sealing chamber, of all places.

"Well, get out." He stood aside from the door, gesturing towards the daylight outside. "Unless you're going to help me."

"With what?" the two asked in unison.

"This." Sasori pointed towards Kakashi, who was still bleeding feebly. "I *would* like some help draining the blood, and it's always a handful trying to get all of the organs out, so—"

"I'm going!" Hinata interrupted, paling considerably. She turned around and stooped to pick something up, and Sasori nearly burst out laughing when he saw that it was the Jinchuuriki's body. She noticed his expression, and just scowled at him. "I don't say anything bad about *your* things, Sasori-san, so I'll thank you not to give me weird looks when I am busy doing my own things."

"Uhh, yeah, whatever. If you're leaving, then leave already. Take Hidan with you. He'll only get underfoot with his limbs scattered all over."

"Hey, I don't see you offering to put me back together, fucker!" Hidan shouted, growling. "And you've never done your freaky experiment shit in the damn sealing cave before, so why start now?"

"Because Deidara is bombing the city right now and I don't fancy my newest acquisition disintegrating before my eyes when I'm halfway done skinning him." Sasori replied patiently. "And I'd like to get this over with as soon as possible, and if you all are going to go out and get drunk, it means I'll have minimal interruptions."

"Get... drunk?" Hinata asked blankly. "You mean this war is almost done?"

"*Yes*. Deidara is going to use Karura on the village itself. Didn't you hear what I just said?"

"But—is everyone out of the city?!"

"Everyone we could manage. Now please, if you're going to bury that thing, then do so. I hate dead bodies, so just move along already." Sasori walked over to her, and shoved her none-too-gently out the door, corpse and all. Next he went back in to retrieve the pieces of Hidan, tossing them unceremoniously outside beside her. Then he waved cheerfully goodbye, dragged Kakashi inside, and shut the stone door with a hand sign.

"So... now what?" Hidan asked, turning to her.

Hinata shrugged, and then sat down beside him, Naruto still in her lap.

Inside the cavern, Sasori finally let himself fall into a fit of silent giggles. He should have remembered that she had been so attached to the Kyuubi! It might have made a bit of entertainment. Sasori definitely wanted to watch when someone tried to take the body from her. Especially if it was Deidara or Neji. And how had she wound up with Hidan, of all people? Sometimes, Hinata just got into more trouble than she was worth.

Sasori quieted himself, trying to convince his mind once more that he was a puppet, and didn't require the oxygen needed for giggles, nor the sense of humor. "Now... let's see about you, Copy-nin."

-.-.-

Karura, the C4 masterpiece, was nothing short of an actual bio-bomb. It only killed living things. Which made it absolutely perfect here. Pein wanted to preserve what parts of his village were left standing, yet wanted to kill everything that was still moving.

Granted, Deidara had never created one quite as large as what would be needed here, but so what? He'd come pretty damn close before. And nothing did more wonders for the limits of jutsu than pressure.

He scanned the village quickly, making sure that not too many people were still there. Sure, he knew that some Ame-nin were bound to get caught in the blast, but he didn't care about them. Just more casualties. All the people he cared about were safely out of harm's way.

Then, leaning over the bird, he caught sight of two shinobi still clashing. And after zooming in with his hawk-eye, the Iwa-nin recognized them both with a thrill of savage glee. Daisuke with Sasuke. Oh, if he could catch *both* of them, he'd be too lucky. Weighing the two in his mind, Deidara figured that he'd much rather kill Sasuke in this blast than Daisuke, but he'd take either or. Plus it wasn't his place to pick and choose who died in this magnum opus.

-.-.-

"Hey, Sasuke?"

No reply.

Daisuke spoke up a bit louder. "Sasuke." More due to the fact that he'd stopped trying to attack and went automatically on the defensive than to his words, Sasuke's attention was caught.

"...what now?" he hissed through his broken jaw, narrowing his eyes dangerously.

"Uhh... not that I'm not enjoying this fight and all... but..."

"But what?" Sasuke asked, raising his voice and rising out of his fighting stance. Daisuke just pointed wordlessly at something behind him. But like Sasuke was going to fall for something that juvenile.

When he heard a loud, echoing *boom* and felt the ground rumble below his sandaled feet, Sasuke saw fit to turn around to see what this was about.

"Oh shit."

"Y-Yeah. My sentiments exactly." Daisuke chuckled weakly, backing up a few steps.

It was easy to see the cause of this commotion. Deidara, hovering on one of his many clay birds, hovering over the city. What he'd just created, however, wasn't a bird. For one, it was *massive*. Even Daisuke, who had seen one of his C3 dragons up close and personal, was immensely surprised at the magnitude of this new bomb. He didn't even want to think of what it would be capable of.

Moreover, it was Deidara-shaped. Down to even the colors, though its eyes were a bit blank, lacking the typical manic glint that so characterized the artist. The boom had been caused by the behemoth stepping down onto a building, crushing it.

There was a long pause, in which neither jounin said anything. Then, when they spotted Deidara's far-off figure raising his arms for the exploding sign, they both high-tailed it out of there with all the speed they could muster.

The boom this time wasn't from a step; this was undeniably the explosion itself. The shockwave itself was enough to send both of them tumbling down the streets. They quickly got back up and running, and were out of the village before the explosion caught up with them.

Looking back, however, Sasuke swore again. There *was* no explosion. No smoke, no fire, nothing. It must have been a ruse to get him out of the village again.

But no matter. He could sense Suigetsu and Karin heading in his direction, and could only wonder at where Juugo was. Maybe it was best to fall back this time, and come in at a more opportune time when he didn't have to fight through half the village to get to Itachi. Sasuke looked around idly. Predictably no sign of Daisuke. Probably halfway back to the village by now, congratulating everyone on getting the younger Uchiha safely out of their hair for the moment.

When his teammates caught up, the first thing they said was, "Juugo's dead."

"What?"

"Juugo. Is. Dead." Suigetsu reiterated. He was supporting Karin with her arm around his shoulders, and her legs were nothing short of a bloody mess. And the Kiri-nin had lost his second sword. Sasuke himself hadn't exactly fared well, either.

"...Maybe it'd time we heeded the leader's advice and waited for a bit. Plus I'd like to see what the hell kind of jutsu they're trying to create with the Bijuu."

-.-.-

Daisuke, unlike Sasuke, knew he couldn't return. He'd remembered the rules: Midori dies, he dies. And Midori was now dead. He was all for the noble course of action, but he wasn't in favor of needless death. It was one thing dying on the battle field. Dying in twisted retribution was another.

He kept running north, hoping that Deidara's explosion would cover his tail and prevent anyone from looking for him for awhile. Then again, Pein was already dangerously short-handed. He doubted that he'd send out search parties for one wayward jounin.

"Midori-chan... I'm sorry. I guess I couldn't protect you."

-.-.-

"...Is that it?"

"Is the war over?"

"Just like that?"

"Did we win?"

"Wh-Where did all of the remaining Konoha- and Suna-nin go?!"

"The Akatsuki saved us!"

"Deidara-sama saved us!"

"Pein-sama saved us! He really is a god!"

"The Bijuu are sealed! The Bijuu are sealed! No more demons!"

"No more war! No more demons! No more fighting!"

"...This will be some funeral, though."

"Oh my... so many died..."

"Mi-Midori-sama died...! Who will be our next Rain Lord?"

"Who will replace Ohira?"

"Who will replace Yuuki?"

"Well, who will replace *any* of the commanders lost, huh?!"

"I-I can't believe it's just *over*..."

"Pein-sama will become our new Rain Lord!"

"Yeah!"

"It's only fitting!"

"Will the Akatsuki fill the commanding roles then, too?"

"Sure, why not?"

"They are the strongest, after all."

"We should worry about all of this later. I'm tired of all of the arguing and fighting and talking."

"Yeah, I just want to go sleep."

"I want to eat something. Damn I'm hungry."

"I want to go get fucking smashed and try to forget this whole thing!"

"Me too!"

"Here, here!"

"Good luck finding something alcoholic that wasn't burned in any of the fires."

"I'm sure we'll manage. We are ninja, after all."

"In that case, I'm coming with you."

"I guess I will, too..."

"I'm just going to go home and sleep..."

"If you still have a home, man."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Let's just all put this whole war behind us. Pein-sama won, that's all that matters. There won't be any more war after this."

-.-.-

"Good of you to join us."

"Hey, it wasn't my choice, here. I really hadn't wanted to come see you. You're all a bunch of stupid little pups, getting yourselves captured like this."

A chuckle. "No need to get snippy, now. It's not so bad, here."

"Oh really?" A disbelieving snort. "Looks pretty bad to me. At least I could fight my way out of the last prison, if need be. I don't even see any *walls* in this one."

"Exactly. See? It's not so bad."

"Plus, you should see what we've figured out."

A long pause. "...And you want me to ask what that may be?"

A high giggle. "Of course! See, we can, as you can see, communicate with each other. And those silly little humans always thought that we're weaker without Jinchuuriki because we don't know our own strength."

"...that's technically true..."

"No need to remind me of it..."

"Anyway! See, the rest of us with Jinchuuriki this whole time, we know the secret! Sure, we're hella strong without them, but with a body to channel our strength through? That's the key, here. Jinchuuriki aren't prisons; they're weapons of our own. Take away a seal or two, and we control them. All the power in the world, compacted into a little mortal human. Isn't that just *great*?"

A flat stare. "...And how is that a secret?"

"Well, you see, since *I've* been sealed more times than your tails, I know the secret behind it. With a bit of time, I could figure out how to seal ourselves into strong humans, without all those annoying imprisoning seals. And then, what's to stop us from *really* messing with the mortal population?"

"...So you're all caught up on what we've been amusing ourselves on until you joined us. But what I *still* fail to realize is *how* we are getting out of here."

"Madara said that he's having one of his men make a jutsu for us."

"Yes, that's what I've heard as well."

"So they're stupid enough to try to put a leash on us?"

"Yes. And now we'll just have to break that little leash, won't we?"

"Sounds like a fair plan to me."

--

The war was over.

And now all that remained was to pick up the pieces of their broken lives.

When all was said and done, Pein only had a village with the population of less than a hundred, less than half of those ninja.

Ninja walked around in a stupor all day long, unsure of what to think anymore. Every time someone came upon them unawares, they would jump or attack or run for it. The village was a very quiet place for a long, long time.

There wasn't only the architectural damage to repair, either. Emotions had been unbalanced, crushed, totally eradicated. Relationships were torn apart. Families were halved or wiped out completely. Shops were closed, vacant homes and apartments were either torn down or moved into by those whose homes had been destroyed. Memories were both lost and created.

The dead were buried and mourned for. Tears flowed as freely as the perpetual rain.

And yet, life went on.

Celebrations were loud and everywhere, it seemed. People would gladly celebrate instead of mourn, just to try to escape from the dreariness of the village. New bonds were forged. Debauchery reigned supreme in these celebrations. That was only one of the many, varied reactions from the enduring population.

Hinata walked around like the dead she'd helped to bury. She wouldn't speak. She would only eat if forced. Her eyes were blanker than they'd ever been. Her hair was never brushed, hanging limply around her face. Her clothes were rumpled and torn, most likely still the same outfit that she'd worn during the war itself.

Neji was more used to the effects of war, and he hadn't lost anyone as close to him as she had. He seemed to spend most of his time just hanging around her like some sort of shadow, looking for

some way to cheer her up. With Hinata's gloominess and silence, eventually he lapsed into his own stupor.

Itachi had been the first to get a word out of her. He'd shown up at their door on the day after the war was officially declared ended. Hinata had merely stared at him, neither surprised or happy to see him. The Uchiha just held up Kisho, who meowed plaintively. Hinata stared at the cat for a long, long time, and then eventually just quietly said, "Thank you," and took her pet back.

If anything, Deidara was worse off. He was constantly grinning. He didn't speak unless spoken to, and usually what he had to say had no bearing whatsoever on the conversation he was trying to be included in. Almost always he had some sort of animated, clay animal on his person. He seemed to talk to these animals in a hushed tone, always shutting up whenever someone else would walk into the room. His room was filled to the brim with his art, and he had to resort to sleeping in Sasori's room, since there wasn't any room left in his own.

"Deidara, is this how *you* cope? I seem to recall that you asked me that same question awhile ago." Sasori remarked, tinkering with Kakashi's puppet. He knew that the Sharingan would have little effect on actual fighting, but it looked marvelous nonetheless. And he was overjoyed to find out that it could still utilize the *Chidori*.

"Do you think I could make Karura talk, yeah? Then I could just send it out in my stead without ever having to do anything ever again." Deidara replied cheerfully, comparing his height to his C4.

"I'll take that as a yes. At least I had the dignity to have my mental breakdown with a singular death. You're having yours for no visible reason." The Suna-nin sighed, holding his screwdriver in his mouth as he adjusted one of the Copy-nin's hands. It was off by just a hair. Making the perfect puppets was such a long venture these days... "I'm just wondering if you'll ever snap back. I miss my old partner."

"I mean, Karura already looks exactly like me. The only thing missing is the voice, yeah. Though it does look a little meaner than I am... I think. I don't even know how I look, yeah!" Deidara laughed, sitting on Sasori's bed. Karura sat down as well, glaring at a spot on the floor.

The redhead decided to humor Deidara. "You two act completely different, however. Not just the voice and the expression. Your walking gaits are completely different, and any good shinobi could tell you apart by scent alone. Plus I much prefer the real one to the clay copy any day."

Deidara turned to look at him, for the first time in days. "...Why? I can't explode nearly as easily as Karura."

Sasori smiled thinly. *At least we're making progress now.* "I bet you could if you wanted to. Plus, human beings aren't made to be weapons for shinobi."

The blonde laughed at him. "You are certainly one to talk, Sasori-danna, yeah."

Sasori shrugged. "I'm not exactly a true weapon though, now am I? Not like your Karura there. That thing doesn't have a single artistic thought in its head. Oh, it may look like it, but it could never pass for human. And trust me, I should know. I've been passing as human all these years, and it's taken a *long* time to perfect that. And I'm still using human parts." He laughed harshly, running a hand through his hair.

"...I still think you're human, danna." Deidara said quietly.

Sasori just smiled thinly at his partner. "So in addition to your breakdown, now you're growing a

heart? I've nearly desensitized myself to you. Can't you wait just a little long until then?"

"Oh, I've always had a heart, yeah. I just like ignoring it. Because it can't explode." Deidara stood back up, allowing himself a grin as Karura mimicked him. He raised an arm, and his C4 did the same. He amused himself by making odd faces and having Karura copy him, back in his own little world.

Sasori sighed, and picked his screwdriver back up. He knew he wouldn't be getting any more work done after that little episode. The Copy-nin puppet would have to wait a bit longer. "Deidara... I don't think I'll ever really understand you. You're entirely too stupid to be understood completely."

"I'm not stupid. You're the stupid one, yeah. You're pretending like nothing's wrong when everyone around you is going crazy." He pointed out, showing that he was at least still acting somewhat sane.

"Everyone around me is *already* crazy, Deidara." He watched his partner do a handstand, smiling to himself as the clay doppelganger did one as well. "I think you're proving that quite nicely right now."

"I'm just trying to be happy, yeah. Everyone around me is always so glum and stupid and morose, and no one's listening. We *won* the war. So why cry about it, yeah?" Sasori realized then that Deidara's borderline psychotic disposition had merely been a defense mechanism. He dismissed it easily enough. "Bya-chan is still quiet about it. I can't cheer her up. Think Leader-sama would give us a mission together, yeah?"

"How would killing *more* people cheer her up?"

"No, it's just me." Deidara pushed off of his hands, landing lightly on his feet with a flip. Karura tried to copy him, but ended up running into one of the walls face-first. "I cheer people up, yeah. Bya-chan can't resist my charm."

"She seems to be resisting it thus far."

"Because of that stupid cat. All she does is talk to *it*, not anyone else. It's not healthy for her."

"And you'd know this... how...?"

"Neji tells me, of course. I'm not a stalker. Duh, danna."

"So all of this is just a happy façade to try to cheer Hinata-hime up. Am I correct with that?"

"Pretty much. With a mission or two, she'll be right as rain again. Uhh, no pun intended..."

Sasori brushed past him, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He smirked to himself, and then pointed out quietly, "You've lost your 'yeah' again, Deidara. Try to work on the tics a bit more and people might believe them."

Deidara flushed, but covered himself by sticking out his tongue at Sasori. "You're such an asshole, *yeah*. Quit paying attention to what I say and mind your own damn business."

"Am I not allowed to pay attention to my own partner? How saddening. Orochimaru never complained when I commented on his speech habits."

"Quit comparing me to Orochimaru." Deidara looked away with a dark grimace.

Sasori smiled triumphantly. "Why?" he asked innocently. Mind games were such fun.

"Because I don't like it. Yeah. I've already killed the damn bastard and you *still* talk about him. Just let the guy die already."

"I'm just comparing the older model with its replacement. I can't say I'm entirely satisfied."

"Why not?! Because I'm not a creepy old fucker who can do weird things with his tongue?! Well I can beat that—I have *three* tongues! So I don't see why you keep talking about him!" Deidara held up both hands, palms facing Sasori. If he could have, the redhead could have blushed. From embarrassment or shock, he wasn't sure. Deidara noticed this, and then added slyly, "I wish I had a camera. I think I'm starting to figure you out, danna."

"Why?"

"Because. You're not as obscure as you'd like to think, yeah. I'm figuring out your own expressions and behaviors."

Sasori swore mentally, but kept his face blank. "I don't have expressions."

"Yeah, you do. Like that one you just did, that's when you're blushing. Well, 'cept you can't blush, yeah. Not physically. And I know when you look tired, or when you're secretly wishing to kill someone."

Sasori couldn't remember the last time he'd 'secretly' wished to kill someone; usually he was quite clear on the matter. Regardless, he didn't like the idea of Deidara figuring him out. "And am I supposed to be alarmed by this? Concerned? Overjoyed? I'm not feeling any of those right now, Deidara."

"Like right now, you're looking like you're going to do something stupid to try to get yourself out of this. And I swear to god, if you kiss me again, I'll blow your ass up, yeah."

The Suna-nin knew enough about Deidara's own expressions to know when the blonde was plotting something. He needed to get out of here before he suffered more trauma due to his partner. "Deidara, just shut up and go back to your Karura. I'm preferring it to the real thing right now. At least it's quiet."

"I'm hurt. Danna prefers a clay replica to its artist, yeah."

"Deidara. Just shut up. Or by god, I *will* kiss you again and lace my own mouth with poison. You'd be quiet if you were dead."

"So now you want me dead?"

Sasori sighed. He just wasn't going to win this argument. Maybe if he actually did kill Deidara, he could get some peace and stability back in his life. "Don't you have any depressed princesses to harass?"

"I'm trying to cheer one up right now, yeah."

"Oh, ha-ha, *how* witty." Without a retort, Deidara stood up and walked out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Sasori was left alone with Karura. The redhead looked at the faux blonde for a moment, and then remarked, "You're much better company."

--

"I have to go on a mission."

Contrary to all historical precedence and popular opinion, Amegakure was economically *thriving*.

Slowly, immigrants were starting to trickle back in. First civilians, and then the occasional shinobi. Pein's forces were absorbing more and more, albeit at a snail's pace.

But the whole fact of the war had *still* worked out in their favor. Wealthy bosses, lords, company owners, crime lords, anyone with money, they now turned to Amegakure. The Ame-nin were hailed to be the strongest out of all of the villages, especially with Konoha all but wiped out. Moreover, there weren't many in supply, so people were willing to pay quite a bit to get an Ame-nin to do a mission for them.

And people were terrified of the Akatsuki now. They had all nine Bijuu. That alone made people cower. So people would naturally be attracted to that kind of protection. Those with the money or influence, would hire the Akatsuki for their missions. Even if the Bijuu weren't directly involved, nothing stood in the way of the Akatsuki now.

Amegakure, if tiny, was now a prosperous nation.

Right now, Neji was trying to get one of his sandals on, still quite concerned that Hinata hadn't spoken. Only a small inclination of her head had told him that she'd heard him at all. Cautiously, he continued. "It shouldn't take more than a month. It's a simple assassination mission, but it's going to pay very well. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Another tiny nod. Her hands moved robotically to pet Kisho, in her lap, and her eyes stared blankly down at his grey fur.

"You should be fine now. No one ought to assign you a mission. And if they do, don't go. Alright?" He didn't even receive a nod this time. He was really starting to worry... Had something happened to her? Neji didn't even know what had happened after they'd put her into that cavern for her own protection. He only caught up to her once again after Deidara's large bomb and in the midst of the merriment. Neji finished pulling on his sandal, and grabbed his hitai-ate. It was now a Rain one; all shinobi were required to wear them from now on. No more mixing pot of different villages. (Even if he still had his old Konoha one.) He bent down and kissed her on the cheek, ruffling her hair. "Goodbye..."

She nodded as he left, doing nothing to fix her hair. Kisho meowed his goodbye, which was sadly more noise than he got from Hinata. Neji sighed, tying his headband as he ran towards the appointed meeting spot. He'd have a partner on this mission, and hopefully it wasn't anyone totally incompetent. He didn't like leaving her there in her state. (Actually, he didn't like leaving her *at all*.)

--

Hinata had quite the crew of visitors. She didn't speak or socialize with any of them. So far, though, the only visitor she'd remotely liked was Itachi, the one time he visited to drop off the cat. How

Kisho had survived Deidara's blast was beyond her, but she wasn't complaining. She would have missed her kitty.

Kabuto was dead.

Midori was dead.

Naruto was dead.

So many people were dead. Dead meant forever. None of them were coming back. At least, in Kabuto's case, not again. No more cheerful good-mornings from Midori. No more wondering what Naruto was doing to convince others that he'd become Hokage one day. No more stopping by the lab to bring Kabuto a cup of tea. No more of any of those things.

Who else would die? Hanako had died. Even though she had saved Hinata's life, she hadn't been strong enough to save her own. Kakeru had died, because his brother died.

Would Neji die on the mission he just left for?

Suddenly Hinata wished she had said a better goodbye.

"Meow." Kisho said loudly, standing up in her lap to rub against her stomach.

"Kisho-kitty..." she murmured, scratching him mechanically along his spine. Hinata felt her eyelids droop slightly. Petting the cat was so relaxing. Maybe it helped that she hadn't slept since the war had ended, either. Her nightmares had given her practice of going without sleep, but it had been nearly a week now. Her shinobi side honestly wondered how she was still functioning. Then again, all she did all day was *sit* there, so it wasn't like she was expending great deals of energy.

Naruto was dead. It was her own village's fault. But which village? Konoha or Ame? Either way she looked at it, it was probably her fault. And on the other side of the coin, Kabuto had died. On one hand, Naruto. The other, Kabuto. They both died, from separate villages, but from the same stupid war. Why had Jinchuuriki even been invented, anyway? The Kyuubi had been free before, so why not again?

Oh well, none of that mattered now. The Bijuu were sealed. The Jinchuuriki were dead. Naruto was dead.

Hinata slowly fell onto her side, falling out of her chair and landing on the floor with a muffled thump. Kisho lightly landed beside her, graciously shedding all over her in her new position. "Kisho, baby... I'm tired."

"Meow," he replied, sitting down beside her. She let her eyes close on their own, slowing her breathing until she could have passed for someone asleep. But she wasn't really asleep. She couldn't sleep; she kept seeing Naruto's dead, blue eyes looking up at her. That was worse than nightmares. Hinata reopened her own white eyes, looking into the green ones of Kisho. He meowed again, purring.

"I... hope he's okay..." She didn't know who she was referring to, but somehow it allowed her to finally get to sleep.

Next Chapter: The Rain rebounds economically, but can the shortage of personnel keep up with the strain? Pein sets about working on his jutsu, Hinata tries to keep out of depression, and Deidara tries to cheer her up. Neji has his own mission, too. Sasori's trying to act busy, purely to keep his partner away. But then, an unexpected turn of events snaps Hinata out of her angst, and who will take the brunt of her anger? None other than Itachi! Neji returns from his mission, with a few surprises as well, which further serves to confuse our princess.

Speaking Only Leads To Arguing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pein was busy.

And when Pein was busy, just like when he thought, bad things happened.

"Damn it woman, I'm trying to work here! This is hard—making a fucking jutsu out of *demons*! I don't see you trying it!"

Like a shouting match in the middle of the top floor of the (new) tower.

"I don't see you letting me!"

"Because you're pregnant!"

"And whose fault is that?!"

Konan knew she had triumphed when Pein couldn't come up with a good retort to that. Men never could. So she smoothly continued, "All I asked is if you would care to accompany me on a stroll through the village to get some tea. And you *are* coming, Pein."

When her voice got that low, Pein knew he had better, unless he wanted another shinobi war on his hands. He didn't think his remaining body could take it. (He had dismissed his other one, due to the chakra it continually absorbed. He needed to pour all of his energy into this jutsu, making sure it was perfect. He probably wouldn't get a second chance.)

So the (faux) leader of the Akatsuki was dragged on an afternoon date by one very moody kunoichi. Pein made a note to *never*, under pain of death, get her pregnant again. He just couldn't take it. Especially when he was nearly decapitated by her.

One unfortunate old woman stopped them to ask when Konan was due.

"Three months from now. *Three months*." After scaring the old woman away, she turned furiously to Pein. "Do I look that pregnant? Do I look like I'm nine months pregnant?! Or am I just fat?"

He honestly didn't know which option to pick. Which would be the lesser of the evils? "Look, Konan, she was merely asking when you were due. That doesn't mean anything. Kabuto had asked the same thing when you weren't showing."

Konan's fury held out a few breaths longer, and Pein had never been more scared for his life. Then, she sagged, and sniffed greatly. "I-I liked Kabuto... I miss him... why did he have to die? Now I need a new medic..."

Pein could see how this day was going to go.

-.-.-

Unlike Konan, Hinata hadn't even gotten out of bed that day. Without Neji, she wasn't woken up at the normal time, and without Deidara, she wasn't woken up at all. Until Kisho jumped on her stomach with a noisy meow demanding breakfast. Hinata was slowly dragged out of bed by his insisting yowls, rubbing at her eyes. Normally she was woken up with a kiss, or breakfast, or even some stray clay animal. This was one of the first times by a cat.

She poured some cat food into his bowl, a bit more than what was strictly necessary, but he didn't seem to mind. He started purring happily, and Hinata gratefully sank into the nearest chair. She continued to rub the feline with her foot. "Oh, Kisho-kitty. I need to get out of this depression... but I just *miss* everyone. Why did we have to get into that war...?"

Kisho just continued eating, swishing his tail.

"It was so stupid. So many people died... Kakeru died, his brother died, Ohira-san died, Midori-chan died, even Kabuto-kun died. And *Naruto-kun*... How many of my Konoha friends died, I wonder? I should have gone back to the village when I'd first had the chance..."

"Mrr," he responded through a mouthful of food. Obviously he was just humoring her in pretending that this wasn't a one-sided conversation.

"I hope no one else dies anytime soon. I don't think I could take that. Ohh, I hope Neji-niisan is safe on his mission... I should have said goodbye to him... he's been so nice to me lately and I've just been stuck in this rut."

The cat continued gorging himself, not even replying this time.

Hinata pulled her knees up to her chest, setting her chin on them. Kisho flicked an ear in her direction at the sudden movement. "I just miss everyone..."

"Well, maybe if you'd stop moping, then you could spend some time with the humans who are still alive. 'Cause, you know, they don't stay that way for long."

"I know—*what*?"

Kisho looked up at her with guilty, green eyes. Hinata stared back, mouth agape. "...meow?" he tried, looking away.

While it wasn't necessarily a good way to get out of her depression, Hinata was definitely out of it. Maybe because she was too pissed at Itachi. And Kisho. "...Wh-What the hell?! You—You can talk!"

"Meow." Kisho repeated, laying his ears back against his head.

"You talked! I know you did! I-Itachi—oh my god, he summons cats! And—And you're a summon! And you've been listening to me this whole time?! And—You've seen me *change*!" Hinata was now on her feet, and Kisho hastily changed tactics.

"Look, Hime-chan, I swear I've had nothing but good intentions. Would you have kept me if you knew I was a summon?!" he replied, looking down at his paws. "Itachi-sama just wanted to keep an eye on you, you know—"

"Oh, Itachi! I am going to *kill* him! You were supposed to be a birthday present! What—Why would he give me a summoned cat for my birthday?!"

"Like I said! To keep an eye on you!" Kisho yowled, bristling. "Please don't tell him! I'll get in a

ton of trouble if he knew I slipped up now! Look, just pet me and I'll purr and we'll call it even!"

Hinata bent down and tried to pick him up, and Kisho wisely decided that it was best not to let her do that just then. He ran for it, streaking under the couch, but the kunoichi nearly caught him. Ninja reflexes and speed, and all that. "Kisho! You get out here *right this minute!*"

"No! I'll find out just how many ways you know to skin me, and I don't feel like losing my fur! It's too pretty to lose!" he replied, glaring at her from the darkness of the couch. All Hinata could see were two green eyes, reflecting the light from the window. She frowned, and got up off of her knees, dusting off her pants.

"Kisho, I *will* catch you, and it won't be pretty. Now come out or I'll make you come out. We need to talk."

"Not-uh."

"*Kisho.*"

"No."

Pushing chakra into her arms, Hinata leaned down and picked up the couch. The cat ran for it, but she caught him before he could make it to the bed. She was very tempted to pick him up by the tail. "Help, help! Animal abuse!" he yowled, trying to scratch her.

"Don't make me make that true, cat."

Hinata carried the shouting cat all the way to the new tower, ignoring the weird looks she got. She even met Sasori on the way, but he just smiled, and continued walking. Then she remembered his many warnings to get rid of Kisho, and she could have smacked herself. He'd known all along.

Hinata was ready to spout fire by the time she was knocking on Itachi's door. When there was no answer, and no one inside according to her Byakugan, she decided to try Kisame's room. Kisho kept squirming in her arms, though now he was completely silent. Probably afraid of Itachi.

After a single knock, a sleepy-looking Kisame opened the door, running a hand through his hair. "Whu...? Hinata? What are you *doing* here?"

"Kisame-san, it's nearly noon. Were you honestly still sleeping?" she asked, slightly amused, slightly exasperated.

"Yeah, well, I just got back from a mission. I'm tired. Sorry, little miss princess."

When Kisho bit her on the arm, Hinata remembered why she was here. "Is Itachi in there?"

Kisame looked a bit more alert, and casually leaned against the doorframe, blocking her view in. His eyes visibly went down to Kisho. "Nope. Itachi-san is on a mission right now."

"...By himself? I thought Leader-sama assigned you two in partnered missions from now on. And you said that you just got *back* from a mission." she asked, narrowing her eyes. Kisho struggled harder.

"Well—uh—yeah. I did." He was obviously thinking something along the lines of *damn, I forgot she actually pays attention to Leader-sama's orders.* "It was a real quick mission, and there were two of them, so he just decided to split us up."

"Uh-huh. Should I be alarmed that a great Akatsuki member couldn't come up with a better lie than that?"

"I told you; I'm tired."

-.-.-

A week had passed before Hinata had managed to corner Itachi. And that was after she had blackmailed, pleaded with, and bribed half of the Akatsuki into helping her search. Technically, it had been Zetsu to first track down the stray Uchiha, but she had gotten Deidara to promise him a few dead animals that he'd killed working with his jutsus, so the Kusa-nin had handed Itachi over.

Itachi was not pleased with this.

He was even less pleased when he saw who he was being handed over to.

Hinata didn't say anything. She just held out Kisho at arm's length, who flattened his black ears against his head and shamefully curled his tail around his feet. Itachi took this in, and then regarded her with dark eyes.

"You never asked if he could talk."

"He's a summon." she replied quietly.

"You never asked if he was a summon." he amended. "Coming from Konohagakure, especially the Hyuuga clan, I had expected you to know a bit about the Uchiha's history. We all have summoned cats for decades now. I would have thought it obvious." Itachi added smoothly.

And just like that, with implied insults and a glare that would have frozen her otherwise, Itachi had talked her out of a week-long rage and depression.

Deidara wouldn't forgive him for it, either.

"I just don't get it. How can he be so mean to you and still calm you down, yeah? I think you should have just stopped his heart or something." All three of them—her, Deidara and Kisho—were in Sasori's room. Mostly because Deidara's was still full to the brim of clay things. Plus, Sasori's room was always very clean, and smelled like wood.

"He probably would have broken my hand again if I tried."

"He should have taken his beating like a man." Deidara grouched. He was laying on his back on the bed, his head hanging off the edge to look at her and the cat upside-down. "Plus, that was a pretty low trick, sending in a cat to peep on you, yeah."

"Hey! I'm not a stupid pervert, and neither is Itachi-sama. You're obviously the most perverted one in the room right now, blondie. I was just assigned to watch over Hime-chan, that's all. And I did, didn't I?" Kisho hissed, his tail frizzing out.

"At least it explains how Itachi had you after the bomb..." Hinata, unlike Deidara, was relatively quick to forgive Kisho. Itachi, on the other hand, was a different story. She still couldn't quite grasp that his intentions had been purely altruistic. He was much too emotionless to do something that

philanthropic. Keep an eye on her? Maybe it was like a disease, how none of the Akatsuki members could lie very well.

"I wasn't sticking around for that. So I ran for it." Kisho replied quietly. He was keeping carefully out of arm's range of both of them, and so far neither of them had captured him again.

"And you claim that you knew that Itachi just wanted to watch over her, yeah." Deidara accused, smiling. Of course, upside-down, it made it look like more of a grimace. "I should have known that that guy was psychotic."

"Coming from *you*? That's a good one. Itachi-sama is a lot better than people like you give him credit for. Like, you should have seen how he acted after he had to kill the—" the cat bit his tongue and hastily covered his mouth with his paws to stop himself from continuing. Hinata and Deidara looked at each other, and then scooted closer to the cat. Hinata, at least, had a sinking sensation that she knew what Kisho was talking about...

"Are you saying that Itachi has *feelings*?" Deidara snorted at the very thought, but she just reached over and clamped a hand over his mouth to stop him from laughing. Itachi thinking about others? Very possible. But *caring* about others? That would be some revelation.

"Kisho-kitty, what were you going to say?" she asked sweetly, batting her eyes at him. She knew that Kiba had never been able to resist that face, so maybe it would still apply.

The feline shook his head, still covering his mouth with his paws.

Hinata switched tactics and abandoned the sweet talk. "Kisho, you were going to finish that sentence with something we shouldn't know, weren't you?"

Reluctantly, he nodded.

"Well... Deidara-kun and I can keep a secret, can't we?" The Hyuuga girl let go of the blonde, and he nodded as well. Both of them moved closer to Kisho, and it was clearly making the cat nervous.

"No, you can't. I'd say something stupid, and then you two would ask him about it, and then I'd get killed, and you two probably would be, too. Stupid idea, Hime-chan."

"Why does everyone have to give you a nickname, huh? *I* was the one who started it, yeah." Deidara mumbled, crossing his arms. Hinata elbowed him in the side, trying hard not to get sidetracked with how cute he looked when he sulked.

"Exactly—you started it. I think Sasori just does it to bother you, though."

"I do what to bother you?" All three of them jumped and the two shinobi turned around, eyes wide and rather guilty-looking. Sasori was standing in the open doorway, staring at them expectantly.

"You know, when you all come into *my* room, I expect I'm allowed to do the same. Regardless of whether or not it's supposedly a secret."

"Uhh... nothing." Deidara and Hinata said in unison, glancing at each other. Behind them, Kisho snorted.

"Well, if you're just doing 'nothing', as you claim," Sasori crossed the room and perched on his bed, which his partner had just vacated, "then I suppose I can't exactly help you, now can I?"

"I'll use your puppets as scratching posts tonight if you dare." Kisho hissed, pressing his ears back against his head.

"For keeping silent for a few months, you are quite talkative now, Kisho-san." Sasori said simply, which effectively shut the cat up. Unfortunately, that was the last thing that Hinata wanted.

So while Sasori was describing soaking his puppets in contact poison if the feline dared touch them, Hinata stood up, dusted her pants off, and walked out of the room. Deidara and Sasori looked at each other, and then the former hastily scrambled after her. The redhead then kicked the cat out—quite literally—and decided to follow them before too much destruction ensued.

-.-.-

When Hinata returned to her home—well, Neji's home, at least—there was a letter waiting for her. Deidara had no idea what was in it, but he did recognize the handwriting. It was Neji's. "Wasn't he on a mission, yeah?"

"Yes, he was. Normal people like to write letters home sometimes, though." Sasori replied dryly.

He ignored the jab, and tried to read over her shoulder. "What's it say?"

Hinata jerked the paper down, stuffing it into her pocket before he could see. She turned around, and while she was a bit paler than normal, she smiled cheerfully and said, "Nothing! B-But come on, we have to go find Itachi-sempai, don't we?"

"...Why?" the two Akatsuki members chorused.

Her face fell a bit, and she gave them both a 'are you kidding me?' look. "...To see why he gave me Kisho?"

"Oh, right, yeah." Deidara rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, looking away. "I have a feeling he wouldn't exactly *tell* you, though. He might hurt you instead, yeah."

"If he really cares about me enough to 'keep an eye on me' with a summoned cat, then he's not going to hurt me."

"Yeah, but we all know how his 'caring' works. He has a little brother and he's just made his life hell, didn't he? What if he uses the *Tsukuyomi* on you again to shut you up?" Sasori asked conversationally. Hinata froze in place, but that lasted only momentarily, for she quickly turned around with another smile.

"Oh, he won't. I know for a fact that he doesn't like to use that technique very often, and he regrets using it on me the first time. He wouldn't waste his energy on me again like that." Hinata chirped, and bent down again to grab her dropped shirt. She turned around again after shooing both men out of the room, and only came out again into their presence after swapping outfits. "So. I need to talk to Itachi-sempai, and he probably won't like you two eavesdropping on that. And—where's Kisho?"

"I left him back at the tower. Were you expecting me to carry him here for you?" Sasori asked flatly. She shook her head.

"Well... I suppose he knows his way around. Or he could ask for directions, I guess. Let's go."

Deidara shrugged, and just tried to keep up with her mood swings. First she was silent, then she

was sad, then angry, and now she seemed painfully happy... why were women so temperamental? He'd swear them off completely if he didn't like Hinata so much and if Konan wouldn't castrate him for it. Deciding to stop talking about his least favorite Uchiha, the blonde tactfully changed subjects. "So... what was in that letter, yeah?"

"Nothing, I told you."

"It was from Neji, wasn't it?"

"W-Well, yes, but it wasn't anything important. Which reminds me! Don't tell niisan about Kisho."

"Why do you still call him 'niisan'?" Sasori asked, reminding them both that he was still in the vicinity.

"Habit." Hinata replied curtly, looking away. "It bothers him, though, so I try not to call him that in front of him..."

"Why is it that everyone has these problems with titles these days?" the Suna-nin lamented, running a hand through his hair. "I wish one of you would stay constant so I don't have to keep up with your stupid changes of mind."

"Like you're one to talk..." Deidara muttered, smiling wryly. Without turning to look at him, Sasori hit him on the shoulder.

"At least I don't forget to add my 'yeah'." Sasori replied, also in a low enough voice that Hinata wouldn't hear.

Deidara returned that remark with his own punch, though more likely than not he hurt his hand more than his partner. "Yeah, well—"

"What are you two whispering about back there?"

"Nothing!"

-.-.-

Tobi stopped them in the hallway. Without even stopping to ask what they were doing, he grabbed Hinata's shoulders, flipped her around, and started pushing her in the opposite direction. Kisho was perched on his shoulders, looking rather peeved at something.

"T-Tobi—"

"No, no time! Sorry, but, uh, you guys can't come in here. Umm... Konan's having a fight with Leader-sama, and it's kind of getting bloody. You don't want to see that, no way!" he rattled off rather hastily. Hinata tried to stop, but Tobi was much taller and stronger than her, so he effectively banished her back outside of the tower. Deidara and Sasori, still inside, had merely watched this with curiosity.

"But I have to speak with—"

"He's on a mission!"

"How do *you* know?"

Luckily, Sasori seemed to be in cahoots with Tobi, and distracted her easily enough from her quest to find her mentor. He held up a folded piece of paper, and asked rather loudly, "I wonder what this is, hmm."

Hinata's eyes widened, and she shot past Tobi to retrieve her letter. The masked shinobi just grabbed her by the back of the shirt, hauling her back outside. Deidara seemed ready to jump in at that point, but Sasori calmly grabbed his partner's wrist and dragged him outside as well, still holding the letter aloft.

"Give that back!" Hinata demanded. It was only Tobi who was stopping her from tackling Sasori, though at least he seemed thoroughly confused.

Sasori, sensing this, gave Tobi a small nod. Then he returned his gaze to the kunoichi. "I don't think so. I want to read it."

With a graceful leap, Kisho jumped off of Tobi's shoulders and landed on the redhead's. Sasori didn't seem pleased with this, and quickly dumped the cat into Deidara's arms. Deidara was even less pleased, since Kisho politely shed all over his black uniform. He then dropped the cat on the wet ground.

Tobi then vanished back into the tower, making sure that they all heard him lock the door. Hinata gave said door a very nasty look that didn't go away when she returned her glare to Sasori. "Give that back." she repeated.

"This is all just sentimentality." While she had been distracted by Tobi, apparently Sasori had saw fit to already start reading. Hinata blushed darkly and made a grab for it, but unfortunately now Deidara's curiosity compelled him to stop her.

"Read it out loud, yeah."

"No, don't!"

"All it says is useless sentimentality." Sasori finished scanning the piece of paper, but then his eyebrows rose. "Oh... this is interesting."

Hinata blushed darker, and Deidara couldn't help but ask, "What is it?"

After a few more moments, Sasori folded the letter and stuffed it in his pocket, saying, "Oh, nothing really, I suppose. He's just already done with his mission, and he'll be home in a few days. I just hadn't expected him to be done this quickly."

The way Hinata sagged in his arms told Deidara that that wasn't what Sasori had been interested in. "I'm serious, what did it say? If you're going through Bya-chan's mail, then I have a right to, too, yeah."

"No you don't." she said flatly, smacking him lightly on the arm. "Neither of you do."

"Why?"

"It says that he got her a ring." Sasori said quietly, folding his hands behind his back. Deidara glanced at him, and then looked at Hinata, completely clueless.

"A ring? What's so bad about that, yeah?"

Hinata looked ready to faint—an expression they hadn't seen on her for quite some time—so the puppeteer figured it was up to him to explain. "A *ring*, Deidara."

"...What kind of ring?" he asked suspiciously, narrowing his eyes a bit.

"It just said a ring. 'I got you a ring.'" Sasori shrugged, smiling slyly. "Hinata-hime is probably mentally panicking over it. Which would be why Neji would choose to phrase it that way."

"Wait... like a *wedding ring*, yeah?" Deidara asked suddenly, letting go of Hinata. She blushed harder, if such a thing was possible. It seemed she invented new shades of red every time she blushed these days. "What the hell?!" he demanded, without waiting for further explanation. "I'll murder that guy, I swear I will—"

"Don't!" Hinata turned around once he'd let go of her, and looked up at him pleadingly. "Don't. He probably only said that to try to cheer me up by embarrassing me."

"Why?"

"You try to do the same thing." Sasori interjected with a chuckle.

"And *you* stay out of this. We're having a moment." Deidara snapped.

"You've lost your 'yeah' again, Deidara." his partner replied.

"Hey, you cut it out about that, *yeah*. I don't want to have to deal with you while making my murder plans, Sasori-danna."

"You're not going to murder Neji-niisan!"

"And I'm wondering why you're acting so blindsided and immature about the whole thing."

Deidara felt blindsided, alright. But not just by this; more by the fact that he had both Sasori and Hinata on his case. Usually they could hardly get along, let alone work together to try to confuse him. He decided to take care of his princess first, since she was always the easiest to handle. Not to mention he could read her better. "You two have been dating for what, a month? Plus—*when* have you two even started dating?! I never heard anything about that, yeah. And now, all of a sudden, this."

"You're acting like a surprised mother. Congratulations, brat." Sasori remarked with a grin.

Hinata wasn't nearly so amused by the argument. "It's been *much* longer than that. It's just... it's complicated. I-I really doubt it's really anything so drastic as a we—*that* kind of ring. Really, Deidara-kun. He's bought me jewelry before, an-and I think it's just that..."

"But I still never heard anything about that, yeah." Deidara said flatly. Now that they had mentioned it, there was a lot of things about their relationship he didn't particularly like. He just knew that some time ago, all of a sudden they were holding hands and kissing and stuff like that.

"Am I supposed to update you with every little detail of my personal life, Deidara-kun?" she asked, her voice dangerously low.

The blonde had the tact—and self-preservation instincts—not to pursue that. "Uh, no, but still... if *I* had something like that going on with something, especially if it involved a damn *ring*, I'd definitely tell you!"

"It's not any kind of special ring! It's just jewelry!" she cried in exasperation, rolling her eyes.

Sasori, meanwhile, decided to intervene yet again. He yanked his partner backwards a few steps by the ponytail, and downward so he could whisper in his ear. "You're a hypocrite, Deidara."

"Let go of me." Deidara replied in a hiss.

"You haven't told her a thing about us, and last time I checked, the Akatsuki involved wearing rings. If you'd trust her a bit, maybe she'd tell you about these kinds of things." Sasori whispered.

"There isn't any 'us', yeah! The Akatsuki rings are stupid enough, anyway."

"Isn't any?"

"No, there isn't! Just weird circumstances. There never has been an 'us' and there never will be!"

Sasori let go of Deidara's ponytail, putting up his hands in a gesture of surrender. Hinata, who had been watching them with her eyes narrowed and arms crossed, cocked her head slightly at this development. "...I see. In that case, I'll be going. I won't bother you with these kinds of things any more, Deidara." Sasori replied politely, bowing slightly in both their directions. "I hope you and Neji have fun figuring this out, Hinata-hime. I'll see you whenever."

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away. Deidara groaned, and then looked at Hinata, and then back at Sasori's retreating form. Pointing at her, he said quickly, "I'll talk with you later about this, yeah."

"I'll be in Itachi's room." she replied coolly.

Deidara rolled his eyes, and then ran off after Sasori, shouting, "That didn't come out how I wanted it to!"

Kisho snickered at her feet, and Hinata just nudged him none-too-gently in the ribs with her sandal. "Come on, Kisho-kitty. We're still going to see Itachi about this."

-.-.-

Neji was expecting to come back to normalcy. Hinata hopefully would have snapped out of her depression, but he wasn't getting his hopes up. Hopefully Kisho hadn't eaten his houseplants. Maybe Deidara would have done something stupid, or something else like that. But Neji was, more or less, expecting to come back to things how he left them.

Needless to say, he was quite surprised at how he found things.

Sasori, for once, was the one ignoring Deidara, who was practically begging for forgiveness for some undoubtedly stupid slip. (Which was what Neji had expected, at least.) They were the ones who greeted he and his partner at the gates for the debriefing. It was the strangest debriefing he'd ever been to.

Deidara wouldn't stop apologizing. Sasori wouldn't stop ignoring him. Neji's partner, a woman named Yukiko, was visibly shaken by this and kept jumping whenever one of the two Akatsuki members would move. It was left up to the Hyuuga to try to continue the debriefing at a somewhat

ordinary pace, and he was the one doing most of the writing in the report, sadly enough.

And then Neji made his first mistake.

He asked, "What's wrong with you two?" once Yukiko had left.

Sasori eyed him calmly. "I don't see what you mean by the question. Nothing is wrong."

Deidara, on the other hand, verbally exploded. "It's all *your* fault! If you hadn't gone for Bya-chan, none of this would have happened in the first place, yeah!"

"Deidara, shut up. You're the one who is being stupid and pigheaded here, not Neji." Sasori replied.

"*I'm* being stupid and pigheaded? You're the one who is being stupid and pigheaded and stubborn and immature! I'm just trying to apologize for—"

"Neji, I think you can go now." the redhead interrupted, not having batting an eye when Deidara turned on him. "I'm fairly certain that Hinata-hime has a few things to say to you."

Neji paled slightly, wondering if it was concerning what he thought it was.

Luck was either with him or totally against him that day, however. For he couldn't find Hinata at all. He returned home to dump his mission stuff in his room, and she wasn't there. (Neither was Kisho, but he had always been indifferent to that cat.) And he knew that she wasn't with Deidara. She could be with Konan, or so he thought. (Unknown to him, Konan was currently having a very heated argument with Hidan, which was progressing very quickly to a full blown fight.)

"To the tower, then," he mumbled, pulling his shoes back on as he exited. Just outside, though, he was nearly bowled over by one of the last people he expected to see.

Kisame held out a hand to help steady him, and Neji just turned to him curiously. "Just the man I wanted to see." the Kiri-nin said breathlessly, indicating he'd ran the whole way here. Probably from the tower, then. The Hyuuga prodigy had no idea whatsoever why Kisame would want to see *him*, however. And he probably would have asked that, if he hadn't been yanked by the arm up over the railing and down onto the ground three stories below. Neji had heard before that Kisame was strong, but he'd nearly gotten his shoulder ripped out of its socket with that little demonstration.

"What's going on?" he asked once he regained a bit of his balance.

"Ehh, nothing much. It's just that you're the only one who stands a chance of getting her away from Itachi-san right now. Sorry about that." Kisame said distractedly, looking in both directions, as if searching for the way to go. Which was odd, considering that the Akatsuki tower overlooked most of the city. Then the brunette realized that they weren't headed to the tower.

"Getting her—Hinata?" Even if he'd already realized that it'd have to do with her, Neji was more than slightly surprised that she would do something big enough to warrant even Kisame's attention. Then again... if it concerned Itachi... "What's going on? Is she hurt?" What was the Uchiha doing to her *now*?

Kisame let out a bark of laughter. "Hurt feelings, *if* that. No, I'm more worried about Itachi-san... and that cat of his, too."

Now Neji was thoroughly confused. Which, for a genius, was quite a feat to achieve. *Hinata* was the one causing the problem? That was new. Moreover he couldn't quite wrap his mind around her

intentionally hurting anyone, let alone Uchiha Itachi. She was scared to death of him! But it had to be something major if it was dragging more than one Akatsuki member into it. "That... cat? You mean Kisho?"

"Yeah. Stupid cat went and messed up, and it pissed her off, and now she blames Itachi-san for it. How stupid, right?" Kisame laughed again, but this time it was more of a nervous chuckle. "And he won't hit her back for some reason that he doesn't feel like sharing, so it's getting to be pretty one-sided."

"Hit? They're *fighting*?!"

"If it can be called that. Like I said, pretty one-sided." Kisame yanked him around a seemingly random building, which almost dislocated his shoulder again, but then pointed out across the street. The clearing looked somewhat familiar, until Neji recognized it as the marketplace where he'd fought Daisuke. It was just as empty as it had been then, too.

Aside from placing the surroundings, the scene itself was completely bizarre. Kisho was there, for one, all frizzed out and *shouting* at them both. Itachi was standing silently there, though one eye was screwed shut and he looked pretty irritated. Hinata was pulling on his hair, trying to drag him somewhere, and was shouting at him.

Luckily, Neji *was* a genius. And he discerned what had happened fairly quickly.

Unfortunately for the two Akatsuki members involved, he was on Hinata's side.

Kisame seemed to notice this, and grabbed him by the back of the shirt before he could get too far. "Hold up, there. I brought you here to separate them, not escalate things." he said flatly, hauling him back into the alleyway. "If I see you laying a hand on Itachi-san, then *I'll* have to intervene, and that won't be pretty."

"Fine. I'll just detach Hinata from his ponytail and try to calm her down." Neji replied simply, glancing up at Kisame with an innocent expression. Before the Kiri-nin could properly reply, Neji was gone, already appearing with a *Shunshin* behind the fighting pair.

Both of them reacted instantaneously on reflex. He ducked under Hinata's elbow, but tripped over Itachi's foot, though luckily it missed shattering his shin like it had been intended for. The result was that somehow all three of them landed in a pile, two of them with their feet sticking awkwardly in the air. None of them were pleased with this development.

"Get off of me." Hinata said, her voice muffled by Itachi's back.

"I missed you, too." Neji replied sourly. He earned an embarrassed squeak and a quick way to separate themselves, thanks to her rather hasty retreat from his immediate vicinity. Itachi gave him (what he assumed to be) a grateful nod as he adjusted his rumpled uniform. Hinata gave the Uchiha a dirty glare, though it seemed to only be somewhere else to look. "Do I want to know how this happened?" Neji asked, though he had more than a good idea of how.

Kisho moving to hide behind Itachi was all the answer he really needed. The genjutsu master looked down at the cat, and then back at Neji. "Ask her," he replied levelly, running his hand through his hair with a sigh. He pulled it out of its ponytail, beckoning Kisame over and then demanding that his partner put his hair back into it for him. It was one of the most bizarre sights Neji had ever witnessed, especially since Kisame complied.

Hinata was likewise all but rapt with the odd picture they made. "I wonder if Deidara-kun makes

Sasori do that..." she murmured, then crossed her arms, making an angry face. Probably she was mad at him and just remembered. Turning back to Neji, she said pointedly, "This is all *your* fault, you know. ...And his." She nodded towards Itachi, who ignored her.

"Does it have something to do with your cat?"

"My cat? Ha. I've disowned the lying thing." She sniffed as she turned away. Kisho laid his ears back, looking appropriately sad.

"I never lied. I've just withheld information. Shinobi should know the difference." the cat stated remorselessly. He didn't seem to care that he was speaking in front of others now, at any rate.

"I don't care. I'm mostly just mad at Itachi-san because he decided to spy on me with a *cat*!"

"I wasn't spying. Believe me, if I wanted to spy on you, kunoichi, I would and you would never find out." Itachi replied in a monotone.

"You two, cut it out. Itachi, apologize to Hinata-sama. Hinata, apologize to Itachi-san. Kisho, you go back to the apartment and we'll deal with you later." At least he'd had practice as a jounin bossing others around. Unfortunately, Itachi outranked him, and Hinata probably outranked him due to her connections inside the Akatsuki. Hopefully neither of them would exercise that authority on him.

Both of them looked at him mutinously for a long moment, and in a smug way, Neji wondered if he'd just made it worse. At least they weren't hair-pulling anymore. "I'm sorry for withholding information from you, kunoichi." Itachi said at last, though he didn't sound in the least sorry. At least the words had been spoken.

Hinata inclined her head, and then mumbled, "Sorry, Itachi-sempai..."

"One big happy family again, eh?" Kisame asked with a snicker, resting his elbow on Itachi's shoulder. The black-haired ninja shrugged him off without any annoyance. "Oh, look, and here comes mommy."

Three heads snapped to the side to see Konan heading towards them. Oddly enough, Hidan was following her, both of them looking to be in rather bad moods. (Even though the immortal had a slight smirk on his face.)

"To what do we owe this honor? Usually you don't come out when it's still raining." Kisame said tactlessly, once the pair got within earshot.

Konan narrowed her eyes, her frown darkening. "You owe this visit to *that*." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder to Hidan. He just stood there with his head held high. Konan sighed, and took a moment to rub at her temples, trying to ward off a coming headache. "You have a mission. A simple assassination, but a very stupid one at that. That asshole has been throwing an absolute tantrum because apparently, there is another Jashinist in the world that *he* didn't convert."

Four sets of eyebrows rose in curiosity. "Another idiot who would worship *Jashin* of all things?" Kisame asked incredulously. Konan nodded. Hidan just flipped off his comrade.

"How long will this take?" Itachi asked, narrowing his eyes shrewdly.

The pregnant woman shook her head. "Oh, no, the mission isn't for you, Itachi. Sasuke was last spotted heading in that direction, so you're not allowed anywhere near there." She jabbed a finger at his chest for emphasis. Itachi just narrowed his eyes further, though the fact that he had to look

up slightly to glare at her ruined most of the intimidation. "Don't give me that look, Uchiha. I don't like this mission, and if I would, I'd give it right to you. But we don't want you anywhere near your baby brother, because we all know how you act around him—"

"So does that mean that the mission is for me?" Hinata spoke up. It seemed as if most of her anger was gone. Either that, or the fact that she was suddenly going to come into contact with another Jashinist was a bit frightening.

"More or less. Him, too." Konan looked at Neji, and then rummaged around in her borrowed uniform for the mission's scroll.

Neji's brow furrowed, and he pointed out evenly, "I *just* got back from a mission."

"This one's important. No one's hired us to do it; it's only because of this whiny bitch."

"I resent being called that." Hidan said in his most affronted tone. All present ignored him.

"Plus," Konan continued, looking quite unaware that Hidan had spoken at all, "This one is a bit of a vacation. Single assassination, no time limit. If you can stand the company then it should be a veritable milk run."

Neji didn't particularly mind being sent on another mission, especially if it was as easy as they were making it sound. But he did mind that Hinata was being sent on it, and he likewise minded that they were supposed to kill a Jashinist. "Wait... how are we supposed to kill this person? I thought you couldn't kill Jashinists."

Hidan snorted. "Yeah, right. This is still a damn rookie. Jashin-sama doesn't exactly give out his immortality secrets to every fucking person to come along to praise him and shit. Otherwise *she'd* be immortal, now wouldn't she?" He grinned at Hinata. She just looked away. "Depending on when he converted, you should have anywhere from five to ten fuckin' *years* before you have to start worrying about shit like that, okay? Think you can kill one little ninja in that timeframe?"

That's interesting to know, Neji thought, but kept his mouth shut with that. Instead, he said, "And why does Hinata have to come along?"

"Because she'll keep Deidara tame."

"Why does *Deidara* have to come?" he demanded, now more irritated than worried.

"To keep Sasori tame, of course."

Exasperated, Neji rolled his white eyes. "Okay, so why does *he* have to come?"

"Because he and Deidara are having yet another one of their arguments and it's driving everyone in the tower bat-shit crazy." Konan replied flatly. "And Deidara's an Iwa-nin. He should know the terrain well, and maybe even know the target himself. He'll be your guide."

Hinata couldn't help but smile that Deidara was accompanying her on another mission, and Neji noticed this. He just couldn't help but remember the *last* time she'd gone with the psychotic pair of artists. She almost didn't come back at all.

Neji tried his last escape route. "If it's concerning another Jashinist, why doesn't Hidan go?"

Hidan also turned to Konan, clearly having pressed this matter before. The blue-haired woman sighed, and rubbed her temples again. "Because, he's needed at the tower, unfortunately. Kakuzu is

helping Pein with some of the aspects of the Bijuu jutsu."

"How fucking gay." the immortal grumbled, rolling his eyes in unison with Neji.

"I'll go fetch Deidara-kun and Sasori." Hinata volunteered. She sounded almost eager. Then again, she'd never been to Iwa, aside from when Suigetsu dragged her a few kilometers past the border. Neji, on the other hand, had been inside Iwagakure itself several times, and wasn't impressed with the place.

Though he and Hinata hadn't been on a proper mission in years. In fact, not since she was a genin and he a chuunin. And even then they usually hadn't been paired together all that often; why, after all, have two users of the Byakugan in the same team? Neji just watched as she ran off in the general direction of the Akatsuki tower, which left him to take the mission scroll and work out the details.

"Come back whenever you get sick of Iwa." Konan said simply, and walked back into the rain in the direction she'd come.

"I'm already sick of it." Neji muttered as he glanced down at the finer points of the mission. They didn't even have a name or a picture to work off of. At least they didn't have a time limit. That seemed to be the only silver lining, however.

-.-.-

As they neared the Iwa border, Deidara was fairly certain he was already insane. At least Hinata had forgiven him for whatever he'd done, which he couldn't exactly remember, now. She and Neji seemed to be on speaking terms, but Deidara only relaxed when he found both of her hands ring-free. Maybe it all *had* been a misunderstanding.

Sasori, however... he was a different story. He was staying as far away from his partner as possible without being rude or obvious, and he was being icily civil. It went beyond annoying; this was just agonizing. Even ridicule was better than this! Judging from the small little chuckles the puppeteer would occasionally make, he knew the effect he was having on Deidara, too.

The biggest reason, though, was that Deidara had *no idea* why this was bothering him as much as it was.

He and Sasori fought *all* the time. They'd ignored each other before. Usually it ended in a physical fight, even. But usually it was about stupid things. Like suicide, or art styles, or why Deidara continually hung out with Hinata instead of Sasori. Somehow this fight seemed different.

God, am I really that big of an idiot? He asked himself repeatedly, during every lull in the conversation. *Why am I even torturing myself about this? No doubt Sasori-danna planned it that way.* How Sasori could have done such a thing, he didn't know. But obviously it had to be Sasori's fault in *some* way.

"Are we going the right way?" Hinata asked, looking around at the lush forest. "I thought Iwagakure was more... rocky."

"It is. We haven't even gotten to the border yet." Sasori replied. "I'm having one of my subordinates meet us at the border. I think she's gotten her hands on a picture of the target."

"She?" Hinata perked up with a sly smile. "This is the first time I've heard you talk about a woman, Sasori-san."

"Now we're back to the '-san' bit? Can't you stay constant? I'm tired of all the changes you seem to go through. It doesn't seem like anything in my life is stable anymore." Sasori lamented, ignoring the jab. Deidara, however, was having a harder time ignoring it.

There's no way. There's no fucking way I am jealous, he told himself sternly. Jealousy was what Sasori was guilty of when it concerned Hinata. It couldn't be something as petty as envy when it concerned some woman he didn't even know.

"Anyway, a picture is all good, but..."

"We need a name." Neji finished her sentence curtly. "It'd be much easier with a name."

"You're both lucky to be getting a picture." the redhead snapped with a frown. "Names are harder to come by."

The conversation continued on like that, generally not including Deidara unless Hinata dragged him into it. At which point Sasori would resort to his iciness once more, and drive Deidara further up the proverbial wall. And then, all at once, they were at the border of his home country.

Which was probably why he was acting so antsy. (At least that's what he told himself.) Coming back to this country for the first extended time in so long... The blonde just hoped that no one held a grudge that long. Especially not the first few shinobi that came to mind.

The woman waiting for them wasn't clad in ANBU or even jounin gear, like he'd expected. Instead she was wearing an Iwa chuunin uniform. Otherwise she was quite beautiful. Tall, thin, with long, black hair and glittering blue-green eyes. Deidara frowned at her, instantly not liking the woman, no matter how valuable she may be to the mission. Hadn't Sasori said at one time that he liked long hair? The blonde's own hair was only about to his waist, and that was only because he'd kept forgetting to cut it.

"Sasori-sama," she mumbled with a deep bow as they approached. Sasori waved his hand and she stood back up, digging in her vest for a small photograph. Without even looking at it himself, the redhead took it and tossed it at his partner.

Deidara glanced down at the picture, keeping his face blank. Sasori watched him intently. Finally, he asked, "Deidara, do you know this man?"

The woman took this in curiously, also watching him. He was also acutely aware of Hinata's eyes on him, though mercifully Neji was still scrutinizing Sasori's subordinate. Deidara tossed the picture back to the woman, grinning. "Am I expected to know every person in Iwa just because I came from here, yeah? How stupid, danna. No, of course I don't know that man."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: So Deidara and Sasori are fighting yet again. Doesn't seem like that's going to stop any time soon. At least they have a mission to distract themselves with! The target is spotted, with interesting results. Sasori and Deidara try to deal with their frustration with each other, all the while trying not to let Hinata in on it. Hinata and

Neji still have that whole 'ring' business to sort out as well...

Iwa Welcoming Committee

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Just stepping over the border into the Land of Earth had an effect on Deidara. Even Sasori's subordinate, who had never seen the man before, could tell that he'd changed.

Mostly because he was rolling around in the dirt laughing his head off.

"Umm... Deidara-kun, what are you doing?" Hinata asked carefully, leaning over him. Neji quickly yanked her back, lest the craziness was contagious.

Sasori's method of finding out what his partner was up to was a bit more... blunt, to say the least. He walked over and kicked him in the side as hard as he could. Instead of shouting, Deidara just laughed harder, rolled over, and curled himself around Sasori's foot to prevent him from kicking more. "Let go of me!"

"No—you kicked me, you're the one who initiated the contact, yeah!" he cackled, practically crying from laughing too hard. Sasori then bent down to sit beside him. Deidara let go of him and instead laid on his stomach, still covered in dirt. "Sasori-danna, I'm *back*."

"Yes, you are. Congratulations."

"No, I'm back! They said I couldn't ever come back, and I did! Twice, now, yeah! The last time I was in Iwa, I blew up half the village, and those bastards have no idea that I'm *back* to do it again!" Deidara tittered, rolling around again. Sasori put out a hand to stop him from embarrassing himself further.

"Sasori-sama, does he, um, normally act like—"

"Yes." Sasori cut the woman off, and she nodded slowly. "Is there any other news of the target or Iwagakure?"

"No—nothing to report." she replied dutifully.

"Then you may go."

The woman saluted, made a few hand seals, and disappeared into the rock below. Deidara wasn't sad to see her go, but most of that was overshadowed by the fact that he now got to blow the same village up twice. Though the fact that this mission was supposedly so easy was a bit disconcerting...

"Deidara-kun... are you done playing in the dirt now?" Hinata asked with an amused smile. Neji just waited patiently for the insanity to subside, one of his arms protectively around her shoulders.

"Bya-chan, you should know me better by now, yeah." Deidara scolded her, grinning. "I like playing in the dirt."

"You can do that later. We have to find that man." Sasori stood up, dusting off his cloak. Already it was almost as brown as his partner's.

"Why? We don't have to be back in Ame any time soon, so we can waste time here."

-.-.-

"Hmm... now let's see where you are today, you little bird bastard..." The man was sitting cross-legged on a large, stone column, scanning the rocky earth below him with a pair of binoculars. It was the only way he could find things, after all. Not having ninjutsu was such a pain sometimes...

The man rotated in his spot, looking down on the other side, near a canyon. Actually, it wasn't just *a* canyon, it was *the* canyon. The Land of Earth's largest ravine, slashing a line through the countryside for kilometers. It wasn't particularly wide, less than half a kilometer, but no one had ever gotten to the bottom. At least, no one had ever gotten to the bottom and come back up. The person he was looking for liked to haunt that particular area, precisely because it was so inhospitable.

What he found wasn't what he was looking for, to say the least. A head of bright blonde hair, long enough that he had to do a double-take to make sure that it wasn't female. Walking in front of said head was another, redheaded person. Behind the bright pair (for it wasn't often anymore you saw anything other than dark hair in Iwa) were two darker-haired people, a male and female, by the looks of it. They were just far enough away, that even with the binoculars, it was hard to discern many details.

It looked like the foursome was traveling in the direction of Iwa. Which was interesting. No one traveled that way anymore on foot; it was just too dangerous. They'd all get killed, even if they were shinobi. No one but Iwa-nin—and even then, only the most skilled—could properly walk upon that infamously narrow path along the gorge.

"...Huh." The man let go of his binoculars, letting them fall into his lap. Foreigners, in Iwa. Ever since the beginning of the Konoha-Ame war, shinobi just didn't hop borders like they used to. Which meant that this must be a fairly important mission, for them to risk it. Iwa was the only big ninja village that was untouched by that war, so it was still a fairly strong country. Not something you wanted to mess with right now. "Wonder what this bunch of assholes is here for."

He picked his binoculars back up, peering through the lenses once more. The frontrunners' outfits matched. That was interesting. A uniform, perhaps? Then, as the man continued watching the group, he picked out little bits of red and white on the black uniforms. Which could only mean one thing.

Akatsuki.

"Oh... oh my god." The man stood up so fast that it made his head spin, and he was halfway down the stone spire before the dust settled from the movement. If the Akatsuki were in Iwa, it could mean several things. They were either attacking the village itself, for the hell of it. Or they could be after someone. The Tsuchikage? Possible. But so many other names came to the man's mind that it just crowded the leader out of his immediate concern. (It was too much to hope for that they were after the same man he was.)

He landed on the ground below with a thump, his mount looking up at him with only a mild interest. Iwa was famous for three things. Somehow winding up on the losing side in every major war thus far in history, all of the rocks, and its goats. They were massive creatures, nearly the size of horses, and they were more surefooted than any shinobi. Faster, too, in most cases.

Ninja or not, it was how most Iwa-nin traveled long distances these days. The mountain goats couldn't talk or understand complex things like summoned animals could, but they could sense danger before a jounin and walk along a hair's breadth of rock. It was common knowledge that on most missions, ninja would save their goats before comrades.

This man's goat was larger and stockier than average, though its long, curving horns and shaggy coat were normal enough. It wasn't his long-distance one, but it was his favorite. "Come on, Aya. We need to get back home and get your brothers out before those nice shinobi down there fall and die."

-.-.-

Night fell quite rapidly in Iwa. Probably because of all of the sheer mountains and cliffs all around them, but it was a bit disconcerting to someone who was used to either the perpetual twilight of Ame or the gradual sunsets of Konoha. The fact that Deidara wanted to keep walking was also concerning; they could hardly see, and what appeared to be a bottomless canyon wasn't too far from their current trail.

"Oh, that? You shouldn't worry about it just yet, yeah." Deidara chirped. At least he agreed readily enough when Sasori stated that they should stop for the night. "Tomorrow, we'll probably get on the *dangerous* part. I was kind of hoping we could get some goats from someone before then, but if we just keep our feet glued to the rock face with chakra, then maybe we could make it through, yeah..."

"...Maybe?"

"Did you say *goats*?"

"Iwa isn't a nice country, yeah. That canyon has eaten more than one shinobi. And *yes*, I said goats." he sniffed primly.

Sasori, by then, had lit a fire, and that distracted them from thoughts of mountain goats for the time being. Those who were not puppets all ate a few ration bars (and in Deidara's case, a soldier pill), and it was amazing how the sudden darkness made them very tired in such a short amount of time.

"And you actually *liked* living here, Deidara?" Neji asked, looking up at the black silhouette of the nearest mountain. "It seems rather harsh and bleak."

"I grew up farther north, and it's a bit better up there, yeah." Deidara shrugged as he reached up to untie his hair. He'd taken to sleeping with it loose lately. (Though on more than one occasion, he'd woken up to find his hair braided by either Hinata or Sasori. Secretly he didn't mind all that much, and was more alarmed at how they both kept sneaking into his room.) "It's not all that bad, anyway. Maybe you're just a pampered Konoha-nin who doesn't know how to rough it, yeah."

Neji gave him a flat glare, and Hinata hastily dragged her cousin off a bit farther away to put him to bed before a fight broke out. No doubt the brunette could still see Deidara making faces and rude gestures at him over her shoulder, but oh well. "You need your sleep."

"Away from the fire, where I might freeze?" he asked, humoring her.

"Um, yes. Just wrap up in a few blankets to keep warm."

"Shinobi generally share body heat." he pointed out, mostly to see her blush. It was getting a bit more difficult these days, but that only made the game more fun.

"At least you ask." she replied with a smile, avoiding his eyes.

"Deidara never did?"

"After it started, not really."

"How did it start, then?" Neji asked. He'd never gotten the full story from her. In fact, he never got the full story of most of her time with the artist before he finally caught up with them.

"I-I had a nightmare one night, and asked if I could sleep with them..." Hinata said hesitantly, turning red just at how immature it sounded.

The pair continued talking quietly, mostly about each other's journeys since the normalcy of Konoha. Both were surprised about what misadventures seemed to befall the other. Hinata, for example, couldn't believe how many times he and Deidara had fought without her knowledge. And for his part, Neji couldn't quite believe how much she and her so-called partner had suffered through on account of the Akatsuki.

They talked deep into the night. Hinata, at times, would glance over and find Deidara and Sasori doing the same, or the Iwa-nin pretending to be asleep while he eavesdropped. For a ninja, sometimes he really wasn't all that stealthy.

The next morning, they had a surprise.

One that created a lot of ruckus, to say the least.

The group hadn't even been walking for a half hour before they found two monstrous *things* tethered to a ring set in stone. Complete with a note that only had a "here" on it, right above a heart.

Hinata had actually screamed when they rounded the corner to find the two beasts. The sudden sound, of course, startled the animals and they started pulling at the ropes around their horns, bleating loudly. She and Neji both looked to Deidara for an explanation as to what they were.

He merely tilted his head to one side, and said, "Huh."

"What do you mean, 'huh'?" Neji asked quietly. It was obvious he wasn't trying to scare the bleating animals any more than he had to, but it made him hard to hear over the din. He glanced nervously at the beasts, which were only tethered by simple ropes. It seemed like a miracle that they hadn't broken loose yet, though admittedly having them tethered by the horns made it difficult for them to pull very hard.

"I haven't seen one of these since I was..." Deidara stopped to count, and Sasori smacked his palm against his forehead, "Nine, I think. They weren't used all that much in the war, yeah."

"And what *are* they?" the Suna-nin asked, glaring at his partner from underneath his hand.

"Mountain goats, of course. What else *would* they be?" He said it like it was the most obvious

thing in the world. The other three just looked at the animals and pictured the waist-high, white creatures that they had grown up thinking were normal goats. Deidara walked past all of them, and stood in between the two goats, putting his hand on one's back and murmuring something soothingly. Sasori couldn't quite hear it, but he had a feeling that it wasn't the language normally spoken by him.

"And... you expect us to take these?" he deadpanned.

"Of course. Unless you want to try to walk the path along the canyon. Which, by the way, has killed stronger shinobi than even the notorious Sasori of the Red Sands, yeah," Deidara replied primly. He continued running his fingers through the goat's thick fur, stopping every few moments to allow his mouth to spit out some of said fur.

"Umm... and these are... *natural*?" Hinata asked shyly, edging towards one of the animals like it might bite her. Which it very well may.

Deidara beamed at her, grabbing her outstretched hand and pulling her towards the nearest goat. They had stopped bleating, but shifted around nervously, snorting quietly. It shied away from her slightly, until he put her hand on it. Hinata looked torn between fainting and cooing. "Completely natural Iwa mountain goats, yeah. I think I had one when I was a kid, but I can't quite remember. But I know that they're natural, yeah."

"More importantly, who are they from?" Neji took the note from Sasori, studying it closely. "This is obviously hand-written, but who would have just *donated* two mountain goats to total strangers?"

"Unless... they're not strangers." Sasori commented. Two sets of eyes found Deidara, who pretended to ignore them and continued showing Hinata how to pet the animals correctly.

After much discussion, they decided that mountain goats couldn't possibly be booby trapped, and it was their best bet at getting safely across the canyon. By then, Hinata had absolutely fallen in love with one of the goats, the lighter-colored of the two. "That one's a female. You can tell by the missing black marks on the ears, yeah. See?" Deidara gave her a crash course in goat biology to boot. "Her name's Aya, yeah."

"Did you just come up with that yourself?" she asked with a giggle, scratching the goat behind the ears. It gave a low grunting sound in pleasure.

"Mmhmm. And that one's name is Ayame."

"Aya and Ayame? Are they siblings?"

"Um, probably, yeah." The pair continued fawning over the animals until Sasori cleared his throat. Deidara straightened with an embarrassed chuckle, and got right to business. "Okay. Who here has ridden a horse before, yeah?"

Hinata raised her hand. Neji and Sasori did not. Deidara wasn't exactly impressed with this percentage of his comrades.

"Okay, then Bya-chan will go on Aya here, and I'll have to ride on Ayame, yeah. Since you two are idiots who haven't even ridden a *horse*, my god. I'm disappointed in both of you." The other two took his disappointment with grace (in other words, they ignored it). Deidara had to show all three of them how to ride a mountain goat without any sort of saddle, and they quickly found out that it wasn't very comfortable. (In fact, the only redeeming factor that Neji found was that he got to ride with Hinata. Which meant that she was practically sitting in his lap, something that he didn't mind

at all.)

It was even less comfortable when the path they were supposed to be walking on wasn't even a meter wide. Deidara casually explained to them, playing the part of the tour guide, that this pass was the second most dangerous (in terms of kills yearly) in all of the Land of Earth, and even chuunin and jounin had a tough time with it. Mountain goats were the only animals that could walk it with any sort of ease.

So the four, now riding two goats, continued on rather awkwardly and slowly. Deidara and Sasori were in front, and Neji and Hinata brought up the rear. The two Hyuuga took turns activating their Byakugan, to conserve their energy. Occasionally, Deidara would create a clay bird and send it up into the sky to check for danger, but it always seemed all clear. That alone made the four shinobi quite nervous; two Akatsuki members, one of them an Iwa-nin, traveling into this country and no welcome party? Suspicious indeed.

"How long is this path?" Sasori asked, glancing out over his shoulder at the black abyss below. On their right was a sheer drop, in which not even Deidara with his scope could find the bottom of. On their left was an equally steep cliff face. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place, and neither of the sides were very friendly. If they were attacked now, things would get interesting.

"Pretty long. I don't know, no one's ever really measured it before, yeah. At least not since I was here last." Deidara replied thoughtfully, tilting his head back. "...Oh, and you all might not want to try to walk on these rocks if you can help it, yeah. It's all pretty loose earth, so chakra doesn't glue you to it all that well. Which accounts for all of the deaths all the time, yeah. Just... try not to fall?"

"You are *so* reassuring, Deidara, I can hardly believe it."

"Don't get snippy with me, Sasori-danna. I can just push you and the goat off into that abyss and fly there myself, yeah." For good measure, he poked the shorter ninja in the back, and shortly afterward put his chin on top of his head to emphasize his point.

"Try it and see what happens." Sasori growled.

"Can you two try not to fight all the time?" Hinata interrupted from behind. Deidara craned his neck back to look at her, about to say something, when all of a sudden the ground started rumbling.

"It's an earth-based jutsu!" That was all Neji, who'd had his Byakugan on, could shout before the landslide came down over the edge of the cliff above them. Both of the animals shot down the trail with a speed that was virtually suicidal before he was even done saying that.

But they were too slow. The first rocks unsettled the path enough to throw their goats just off-balance enough to make things difficult. The goat carrying the Akatsuki members jumped on top of the first boulder it saw, leaping forward just out of range of the falling rocks. Hinata, Neji and their goat weren't so lucky.

The three of them went over the side of the canyon with nothing more than a bleat and a sea of rocks.

Ninja reflexes could do little to nothing here, especially when what they were trying to climb back up onto was moving stone. Deidara was already halfway off the goat, throwing a small clay bird into the air.

"Kick out!" Neji shouted, for the torrent of the landslide was already trying to keep them glued to it. Hinata ignored him, too busy trying to save the goat. He, in turn, ignored her noble attempt at

saving the beast, and just grabbed her by the waist and pushed his chakra into his feet for some purchase. This had mixed results: Neji managed to jump up above the landslide, but an ill-timed stone was enough to push him off balance enough to let go of his cousin.

So he was now on stable ground, beside Sasori and the remaining goat. Hinata was not.

Sasori had to physically hold him back from going over the edge again to try to save her. The only thing that really stopped him from using a *Kaiten* to break loose was the fact that he knew he couldn't do anything. Deidara was the best bet now.

Said blonde was currently freefalling about two meters away from Hinata and the mass of the rocks, trying to figure out a way to rescue her that wouldn't get his bird pulverized by the landslide's bulk. Luckily, with the distance they'd fallen, the stones were beginning to disperse slightly, allowing some room for some proper flying.

Hinata, however, would have none of that. The second she had enough room to touch the canyon's wall beside her, she glued her feet to it and ran *downward*.

"What are you *doing*?!" Deidara yelled after her. He somersaulted in mid-air, and as he was upside-down, kicked off of it to get the proper thrust to catch back up with her. His bird was left hovering in confusion above them.

The Hyuuga girl ran down the canyon wall, dodging the falling rocks and trying to catch up with the tumbling goat below her, which was bleating pitifully. It only took a matter of seconds for her to catch up with it, though to Deidara, it felt like years. He couldn't believe she was attempting suicide over a *goat*. (Even if it was Aya, it was still a *goat*.)

Hinata latched onto the animal's thick fur like a tick, and immediately set about to trying to stop her freefall. Which would have been nearly impossible regularly, minus the fifteen-hundred-pound mountain goat and falling rocks to dodge with said animal. Plus, then Deidara realized that he didn't have the same methods—namely the rock and his chakra stuck to it—of slowing down. He passed her just as she started to slow down, and he could only think *shit*.

Somehow, his bird managed to catch up to him. Not that he was complaining. It was just that he could actually see the bottom of the infamous 'bottomless' canyon by the time that it caught up. Plus having his fall arrested so suddenly jarred him, and he was fairly certain that several ribs were cracked, if not broken. The wind was knocked out of him, at least. Deidara struggled to sit up on the clay, knowing that Hinata was still stuck bird-less.

He was quite surprised when he found her still several meters above him, struggling valiantly to slow down. To her credit, both she and Aya were nearly stopped, though they were nearly hanging upside-down from the angle of the rock they were stuck to. "Need a lift, yeah?" Deidara asked, hovering beside them on his bird.

She gave him a dirty look, probably too tired to even attempt speaking.

It was tricky, getting the terrified goat into a position that it wouldn't kick too much and send all of them careening down into the depths once more, but after a few tries, the two ninja managed it. Hinata was sprawled out across the bird's back, sweating buckets with her chest heaving. Deidara watched in amusement, before saying, "That was a stupid thing to do."

"...Yeah?"

"Nearly killing all of us for a *goat*? Pretty stupid, Bya-chan." He reached back and ruffled her hair.

It only served to annoy her, but mostly because she clearly didn't have the energy to fix it. Deidara's hand lingered over her forehead, where that Cursed Seal of hers was barely visible underneath her bangs. Hinata caught on to this, and quickly rolled over onto her side, her back to him.

"Sorry. I... didn't want to see Aya-chan die... is all." she murmured.

"That's okay, yeah. Just don't scare me like that again. I think you took a decade or two off my lifespan, though. I don't even want to know what state Neji's in right now."

And as it turned out, Neji and Sasori were doing quite fine. And by 'quite fine', it meant that they nearly collapsed from relief when they saw the clay bird rise from the darkness of the gorge. "Why did you do that?!" Both of them demanded this in perfect unison, much to the amusement of Hinata and Deidara.

"I was saving her, yeah." Deidara said as he helped his rescued princess onto safe ground once more. He pretended not to look when Neji hugged her and set about to making sure that she wasn't too badly hurt.

"And I was saving Aya-chan." Hinata chirped happily, nodding toward the goat. The animal seemed very grateful to get on solid ground once more, and was sniffing the rock all around it suspiciously.

"You're both idiots. I really thought you had known better, Hinata-hime." Sasori replied dryly, watching as his partner got off of his bird and minimized it again with a hand sign. "...At least neither of you look *too* badly hurt."

"Was danna worried about us? How cute, yeah." Deidara crooned, brushing past him toward the goats. The redhead huffed, and couldn't help but wonder when the tables had been turned on him again. Deidara was busy murmuring comforting things to the mounts, yet again speaking in a language that none of the other three could place.

-.-.-

"Who are *they*?" the man demanded, peering over the edge of his bird. The hawk grumbled something unintelligible in response, clearly not wanting to get caught in some kind of conversation with the man riding it. "They dodged my landslide. How did they do that? I thought I had at least caught those last two in it."

"They jumped." the hawk deadpanned, circling once more. Its master huffed, and settled back in its feathers again. "So what."

"So, it means that they're actually going to get somewhere. And if I keep using landslides like that, then the little blonde one is only going to use *her* birds and then it'll only be a matter of time before they find *us*. I can't easily stop them now. Which is such a pity."

"Do you even know where they're going." the bird complained flatly.

"No. Probably to Iwagakure, though. Everyone seems to be going there these days. Calling all of the good little ninja back and all that." The man yawned, feigning boredom with the subject. Since the summoned hawk didn't reply, he just decided to continue. "I wonder if Takamaru will try to

stop them, too. Usually I don't let too many get by for him to play with."

"What if they're going to see Takamaru." the hawk asked critically.

"Ha, as if. Takamaru only associates with his goats and his woman. Which reminds me... didn't your brother say that he saw her heading back *without* Takamaru?"

"Yeah. Yesterday, though. Probably already home by now."

"Probably not. She didn't pass those four down there. Well... what do you say we go and see if we can pay her a little visit? That ought to get Takamaru's blood boiling."

"Sure, whatever."

-.-.-

Nothing else really happened until sunset. This encouraged the two Konoha-nin, especially since their path had shrunk to only about a foot wide. Somehow the mountain goats were still able to walk along it comfortably, however. Not that they were complaining.

"How can this be traveled so frequently?" Hinata asked, peering over the edge with an audible swallow.

"Iwa-nin do it because foreigners usually can't. So it's a pretty secure route to take, yeah." Deidara replied simply. She supposed that that made sense. "But I've heard that recently a few missing-nin have taken to messing with shipments coming along here. Which was probably what tried to throw us over the edge earlier, yeah."

"Then why haven't they attacked again?" Neji asked sharply, turning from looking downward. "It should have been clear that none of us were killed by the jutsu."

"They might have given up when they saw the uniforms, they might have just wanted to mess with us, it might have been a one-time-use jutsu, it might have been *anything*, yeah. Do I look like I can read their minds?" Deidara bent over backward to glare at him upside-down. He stuck his tongue out as well, but since Hinata was positioned in front of Neji, she calmly up righted him again with a flat stare.

"The point is, they haven't attacked again," Sasori said calmly. "And if they're planning a second attack, it'd most likely happen in the night, not now."

"Oh great, a sleepless night, yeah."

"Well, I was going to volunteer to keep watch, but since you seem so enthused about the idea, I think you can." he said with a smirk. Deidara groaned, rolling his eyes.

And then, it turned out that Sasori was wrong.

The two goats rounded a bend in the narrow path, and they came across a man. He was balancing on a particularly thin stretch of rock on one foot, the other held out for stability. His arms were crossed, however, and he was looking at them with an air of expectancy.

The mountain goats stopped a few meters in front of the man, snorting quietly. Hinata had to lean

out over the side to see past Deidara and Sasori. This stranger had silver hair, but it was obvious that he couldn't have been older than thirty or so. For the briefest moment, his hair color reminded her of Kabuto.

But everything else about him was so very un-Kabuto that the familiarity didn't last more than a second. He was heavily built, much more muscular than most shinobi these days. She couldn't quite tell his eye color, but they were dark. He was dressed in a nondescript shinobi uniform: dark pants, closed-toe sandals, and a high-collared dark shirt. No visible headband to go off of.

The strangest thing, however, was that the man was grinning. It wasn't a friendly grin; this was a crazy, I'm-going-to-kill-you-soon grin. She'd seen it on Deidara enough times to recognize it by now.

Speaking of Deidara, the blonde was slowly standing up on the goat's back, balancing with his arms out. This way, he could keep an eye on this stranger, but also it allowed him the slightly more intimidating pose of looking down at him. Basic shinobi tactics when confronted with an unknown enemy.

The man spoke. At first, Hinata thought she was hearing things, because she couldn't place any of the words. It sounded like gibberish. Then she realized that he must be speaking another language. Did they speak other languages in Iwa?

They must, because Deidara answered in the same nonsensical language. Sasori looked up sharply at his partner at this, narrowing his eyes. Hinata had definitely never known that Deidara was bilingual; apparently Sasori hadn't, either. Things might get complicated if they would have to rely on a translator.

Both the blonde and the silver-haired men continued conversing in the foreign language. Judging from their expressions, neither of what the other was saying was pleasing. The man's grin was slowly fading, and his brows had already furrowed. Deidara, likewise, had carefully moved down to take a bite of the clay in his pouch with one hand. Hinata felt the small spike of chakra behind her that meant Neji had activated his Byakugan. She did the same, though mostly so she could keep an eye on Deidara, rather than attacking. Something about this meeting seemed... off.

Even if he was overconfident, Deidara wouldn't make such a show of going down to get some of his clay. Not unless he was planning something. In which case, maybe the best position wasn't so close to him. Then again, it wasn't like they had anywhere else to go. It was either a straight drop down on their right or a straight shot up on their left, with very little room in between. Fighting here could be tricky.

Deidara then jumped off of the goat's back, landing in front of them on the path. He wobbled for a moment, before slipping and falling over the edge. Hinata wasn't worried, since she had seen his hand spit out another bird just before he fell. It was another ruse, so he'd have an excuse to arm himself. And sure enough, he rose back up out of the canyon, the owl below him watching the silver-haired stranger warily.

Sasori wasn't watching the enemy, however. He was watching Deidara, with an expression that should have been reserved for the enemy. The redhead turned around, and whispered, "He's betraying us."

Next Chapter: Is what Sasori thinks true?! Is Deidara betraying them, or is this all a big misunderstanding? And if it is, who is this silver-haired man, anyway? And who were those people watching the group? Things just get more complicated next time, in Dark Knight!

More Than One Needs To Know

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What do you mean, he's betraying us?" Neji hissed back.

"I'm not sure what language he's speaking, but it has some common elements with an old dialect that some rural Suna civilians used to speak. He's already said we're Akatsuki, that you two are Hyuuga, and that we're here for an assassination of a relatively unknown target." Sasori replied under his breath. It was quiet enough that they had to read his lips to fully understand what he was saying.

"He could be asking for help, or directions—" Hinata tried to defend him, but Sasori shook his head.

"No. We've all known that Deidara is unusually attached to Iwa for a missing-nin, and being back here must have only rekindled that loyalty," he pointed out coldly. "The second he tries to attack, I'm going to cut him off."

"Why?" Hinata asked. She couldn't quite grasp the fact that Deidara would betray them. But while Sasori and her weren't exactly on great terms, he wouldn't benefit in the least right now by lying to them.

"Because. Frankly, hime, you're the weakest one right here and he's going to go for you. Possibly Neji. The point of the matter is that I'm the only one who can fight him on equal footing, and don't forget that he has the terrain's advantage here. Your *Juuken* would be next to useless unless you could grab him. In which case he'd just nail you with a *Jibaku Bunshin*." Sasori replied patiently, glancing back towards his partner every few seconds. Deidara was still locked in foreign, verbal combat with the stranger.

Then, just as Sasori turned around and pretended like nothing had happened, Deidara jumped off of his bird. The Suna-nin visibly stiffened, but it wasn't aimed at them; the blonde had landed squarely on the silver-haired man's chest, pushing him into the stone wall with his own body weight. The man retaliated by grabbing Deidara's ankle, holding him out over the edge of the canyon upside-down.

At least it dispelled most of the thoughts about his treachery.

Deidara squirmed, trying to swing back into a position where he could do something other than dangle. The man compensated for his movements easily. Unfortunately, that only made Deidara use his already active owl.

The bird didn't explode. Instead, it just fluttered down and tried to peck at the man, beating him upside the head with its wings. The man instantly dropped Deidara, but the blonde saved himself with another bird (this time, a hawk). The owl, by then, had already wrapped itself around the man, pinning him to the path below with a clawed foot. Deidara grinned, in the same manner that the other had been grinning before.

"Okay, I give up. You win." the man exclaimed.

"And I'm supposed to just let you go like that, yeah?" Deidara asked.

"If you want your little owl and your friends to survive, then yes, Deidara. Let me the hell up."

The blonde huffed, and snapped his fingers. The owl apologetically let the man up, who dusted himself off and shot the clay animal a dirty look.

Meanwhile, the other three were having mixed reactions.

They had, at least, realized that they were not being betrayed, and instead Deidara somehow knew the man. And while Hinata was relieved at this, Neji and Sasori were not.

"Guys, this'll be our guide in Iwa, yeah." Deidara said lightly as he hopped down from his hawk. The silver-haired man's grin returned, and he waved at them all. "His name is Takamaru, and—"

"Deidara, may I have a word?" Sasori interrupted as politely as he could, waving his partner over. He stood up and got off of the goat in a manner like Deidara's, minus the falling. Deidara obviously followed him, walking along the path like it was a balance beam. The pair rounded the bend, and almost immediately, a one-sided shouting match ensued.

"So... that's his partner in the Akatsuki, huh?" Takamaru said conversationally. Hinata and Neji returned their gazes to him, keeping him at bay just with that. The white eyes had that handy little effect on most people.

"How do you know him?" Neji demanded, trying to ignore the yelling behind them. Sasori would take care of Deidara, but right now, it'd be wise to figure out where the connection was.

"Oh I don't know him. I've never seen the little redheaded bastard before in my life. But he sure has it out for Deidara, doesn't he?" he replied readily. The constant smile was getting to be a bit disarming, too, especially now that they realized he wasn't giving off any killing intent at all. He almost seemed... friendly.

"How do you know Deidara-kun?" Hinata clarified before Neji could get too irked with the response.

Takamaru sized her up, though his dark eyes stayed longer than what was strictly necessary on certain parts of her body. Hinata frowned, and crossed her arms protectively over her chest. He laughed when he saw this, knowing he'd been caught. "Well... I'd have to say if 'Deidara-kun' hasn't told you, then it's none of your business, young lady." Even with his light tone and pleasant smile, it was obvious that Takamaru *really* didn't want to tell her anything. Probably so he could stall until he had time to collaborate with Deidara.

At that point, Deidara and Sasori came back, carefully walking along the narrow trail. Deidara had a bloody nose, but Sasori definitely looked the angrier of the two. Hinata was about to protest, when Takamaru beat her to it. He ran over, leapfrogged over the first goat's back, and then *somehow* sidestepped the second and was between the two Akatsuki members in a flash.

Deidara, for his part, almost seemed to be *expecting* this. He even stepped back to compensate for him. Sasori's eyes widened for a brief moment, betraying his surprise, but he just raised an arm. A handful of senben appeared in his hand, poison literally dripping off of the tips. Takamaru grinned savagely, and mirrored the movement. With his other hand, however, he made two half-seals, and a pure white kunai made out of *something* that definitely wasn't metal appeared in his outstretched hand.

Sasori raised his eyebrows expectantly, and with his free hand, pulled one of the blades out of his shoulder. Takamaru yet again copied the movement, though again, he was just creating a white,

nonmetal version of the weapon. The Suna-nin's patience for this mimicking game was clearly running out, and he threw the poisoned senben needles at him. Takamaru blocked them with his kunai.

Sasori apparently just wanted to free his hand, however. He held it out palm-up towards the silver-haired man, and a click sounded. Takamaru cocked his head to the side, obviously expecting another physical weapon. Before the puppeteer could start the flamethrower, though, Deidara pushed past Takamaru and stood in front of him protectively.

"Okay, whoa. No. I was the one about to kick his ass because of you, and now you're just interrupting that?" Takamaru protested, dropping his other weapon to try to yank Deidara backward.

Sasori scowled and looked away, letting his arm fall back limply at his side. The other arm reached back to replace the blade. "*You* were the one who attacked first."

"No, I didn't. You armed yourself first," he pointed out. He was currently half-leaning on Deidara, pushing him down so he could argue with Sasori properly. Deidara didn't look particularly happy with this.

"You interfered."

"You threw the first senben."

"You had no right to interfere."

"You hurt Deidara."

"He was being an idiot and deserved it."

"How?"

"I'm not going to explain myself to an enemy! Nor will I be talked down to by—"

"Will you two stop it?" Deidara exclaimed, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Danna, I'd quit talking with our guide. Takamaru, stop arguing with him or he'll kill you in your sleep tonight."

"I can stay up later than he can." Takamaru said simply.

Deidara half-turned to give him a wry smile. "No you can't, yeah."

-.-.-

Somehow, in a way probably only Deidara could have managed, they wound up traveling the rest of the way of the path with Takamaru. Sasori remained in back, refusing to go anywhere near the two Iwa-nin. Neji and Hinata were also silent, though more for curiosity's sake than because they were pouting. So that left most of the talking up to Deidara and Takamaru.

In addition to making random small talk, not all of it in the same language, they appeared to have a contest to which could do the stupidest thing. Or riskiest, maybe, but it appeared to just be stupidest. Takamaru was now walking down the meter-wide path on his hands, Deidara on his bird above him, looking for the proper time to try to give him a push.

Hinata was probably the most surprised by this. Deidara was acting like a kid... well, more of one than usual. And somehow, this felt natural, not like his forced cheerfulness he usually adopted. He looked completely carefree. She had seen him in a variety of states, from drunk, to terrified, to bloodthirsty. But he never seemed *this* untroubled. At first, he had to deal with Sasuke and Neji. And then, afterward, it was the Akatsuki, and then Sasori. It seemed that Takamaru could just put him at ease like none of them could.

So how do they know each other? She asked herself for the millionth time. From what she knew of Deidara's past, it didn't leave many openings for Takamaru to have stepped in. Of course, they could have known each other in the academy, or when Deidara was in active duty. Or maybe even before that. Did they grow up together? No, Takamaru looked older than him... but then again, that didn't mean anything. Were they teammates?

"So then Leader-sama let me use my C4 on the whole village, and—"

"Don't you think you're telling Takamaru-san a *bit* too much about recent events, Deidara?" Neji said conversationally. Both Takamaru and Deidara looked back at him, the blonde more surprised than the silver-haired man. It almost looked like he had forgotten they were back there.

Then, instead of arguing, Deidara just said, "Fine," and dropped the subject. Instead he switched languages, but the way he kept petting his bird demonstrated the fact that he was talking about his art.

Behind them, Sasori huffed audibly. Hinata leaned over to try to look at him, but he just looked away when she tried to catch his eye. *Fine then, you stuck-up elitist snob. I'll let you and Takamaru rip each other's throats out*, she thought vindictively, turning back around with a huff similar to his. "Um... Deidara-kun? How much further?" she called, mostly to spite Sasori further.

"Depends," he replied airily, turning to her with a grin. "Where are we going, yeah?"

Needless to say, this wasn't exactly comforting. "You *don't* know where we're going?" Neji asked. Hinata noticed that when he got particularly angry—though usually it was only with Deidara—his voice got quieter, rather than louder.

"That's my job, isn't it?" Takamaru replied. He was grinning again, too. "I figure that since the sun's already set and stuff, we can just crash at my place for tonight. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"And we're trusting this man?" Sasori asked loudly, though who he was asking was probably up in the air. Takamaru's smile faltered, but only slightly.

"Is there any reason not to?" he asked gleefully. He probably would have giggled if he wouldn't have gotten stabbed for it. Hinata really had to wonder if he was on any kind of drug.

"You've only attacked two of our team, and I would even venture a guess that you were behind that landslide from earlier." Sasori replied lightly. She looked back at him, to find that he was using the same tactics he'd tried on them when they first met; smile innocently, and act younger than he was. She couldn't help but hope Takamaru didn't fall for it.

"Landslide?" the silver-haired shinobi perked up, cocking his head to one side. He turned to Deidara, inquiring, "What landslide?"

"Oh, a landslide earlier, yeah. Almost took Bya-chan with it. Oh and Aya, too."

"It almost took my Aya?!" Takamaru stepped back and hugged his goat around the neck, burying his face in its shaggy fur. The other four took this in with blank faces, completely unsure of how to

handle it.

"...At least we know who the goats were from now." Neji whispered in her ear. Hinata couldn't help but smile, and elbowed him lightly in the side to stop him from saying it any louder. Who knows what kind of reaction that'd evoke. Regardless, Neji raised his voice, and asked, "So you know nothing about this landslide? We know it was an earth-based jutsu, and you happen to be an Iwa-nin in the area..."

Takamaru raised his head out of the animal's fur, staring at Neji with a curious expression. He continued staring for a long time, to the point where it was getting very awkward. Then, without warning, Deidara snorted and started cracking up, nearly falling off his bird from laughter. Takamaru, then, also started laughing, having to hang onto Aya's neck to keep himself from falling into the canyon.

"...I have a feeling that there's just been a joke on you," Hinata commented, trying hard not to join in with a giggle. Just seeing Deidara and Takamaru laughing so hard made her want to join in, and she didn't even know why it was so funny.

"Hah... good one, pretty boy." Takamaru gasped out between barks of laughter. "The only way I could create a landslide was to start throwing rocks."

Deidara grinned roguishly, and clarified, "Takamaru can't use ninjutsu. Or genjutsu. Or even chakra, yeah."

Three pairs of eyes widened, precisely for the same reason; they had *seen* him use hand signs earlier and create weapons from that. Takamaru, however, shook his head and spoke up. "Hey, that's a lie. I can use my chakra. Just..."

"Not normally?" Deidara supplied helpfully. The other Iwa-nin rolled his eyes, but nodded.

"How so?" Neji asked skeptically. Hinata couldn't help but agree with his suspicion. Even if Deidara was helping to cover for him, he wasn't exactly someone they could blindly trust right then. Plus they had all *seen* him use seals.

"Ehh... I'll explain it when we get there. Speaking of such, that blasted path is finally over up ahead. Then it's only a few minutes to my place," he changed the subject with a continuation of his smile. Deidara bobbed his head in agreement.

"Trust me, guys. Unless you want to wait around tonight for our attackers like Sasori-danna said, yeah. Takamaru's our best bet." he chimed in. Sasori knew that his name was only brought in to try to gain back some credit, but he'd have none of that. Hinata knew that this would be one awkward mission if those two didn't kiss and make up *real* soon.

-.-.-

Neji would have had to guess that it was at least midnight before they got to Takamaru's 'home'. Which, really, just looked like a hole in some rock. He couldn't say he was impressed, but at least he wasn't disappointed. He'd stayed in worse places.

Inside, however, he was pleasantly surprised. As if sensing this, Takamaru remarked, "When you live inside a mountain, there aren't exactly any size restrictions. All it takes is a few well-placed

bombs and a bit of hard work, and you can get a veritable mansion."

Wait... bombs? "You mean, Deidara helped you make this? Or are you a terrorist as well?"

"I take offense to that title, yeah." Deidara interjected with a frown. Sasori hid a snort behind his hand, turning it into a hasty cough when his blonde partner turned on him with a flat glare.

Takamaru smiled, biting his bottom lip to likewise stop himself from laughing. "No, I told you... Not an ounce of ninjutsu talent in my body. Can't use a speck of it."

"That's a lie. You can use a *Bunshin*, yeah."

"Not with the intended results, though. So it doesn't count."

"Yes it does."

"No it doesn't."

"Yes it does, yeah."

"No it doesn't."

"Yes, it—"

"*Ahem*." Neji coughed loudly, breaking up the playful argument before it ate up any more of their time. "Not that we're not *dying* of curiosity and suspicion surrounding your relationship and chakra use, perhaps now isn't the best time for that argument."

Takamaru stared at him for a long moment, and then brightened. "Oh, of course. You guys are probably tired, right?" Neji knew, at least, that he and Hinata were dog-tired. Sasori, well he probably wasn't, but at least he *looked* tired. Or maybe he was just tired of dealing with Deidara in his natural habitat. Neji knew he was. "Well, I haven't had guests in forever and a day, so I guess you can just find a room and crash there. But—if the door's locked, stay out. Otherwise, sleep wherever. Sleep on the ceiling if you can manage it."

It was slightly disturbing that Takamaru would just turn three foreign shinobi loose in his house with no supervision. Or maybe this was a test. But watching him converse with Deidara—again, only half of it in any recognizable language—it seemed that he might actually be that laid back. Maybe.

"So we just sleep... wherever?" Hinata asked hesitantly, looking around. Aside from the long tunnel leading outside, they were in some sort of sitting room. Hallways led off in either direction, and from what Neji could see, they were lined with more doors or hallways. More of a maze than any Akatsuki lair had ever been. She was very obviously wondering how they'd get back out if they got lost trying to find a bed.

"Come on," Neji grabbed her by the shoulders and steered her down the nearest corridor, into the nearest room. At least they couldn't get lost that way. But the door was locked. He frowned, and went to the room across from it. Locked, again. The jounin sighed, and swore that he'd kill Takamaru if he'd locked all of the doors just to spite them. Not that he couldn't pick the lock in a second, but no telling what kind of surprises might be on the other side.

On the fourth door—while the other three shinobi were watching him try doors with amusement—it finally opened. "Oh no, you can't go in there." Takamaru called. "That's Sukeru's room."

Neji grit his teeth and tried not to envision killing their host in the bloodiest way he could imagine. "Who is Sukeru?"

"My assistant. She was out running an errand, but she should be back sometime tonight or tomorrow morning." he replied cheerfully. With the perpetual grin, of course.

"Neji—this room's unlocked." Hinata said quietly, pulling him away before a fight could arise. She managed to get him into the room before he could do more than growl in Takamaru's direction. (And as the door was shut behind him, he could have sworn he saw Deidara laughing at him. Just peachy, as if he needed another reason to hate the guy.)

For a moment, it was pitch black in the room. Then, with a click, the light flickered on, and they were both left standing in a rather dim light, looking around at where they would be spending the night. At least no immediate traps jumped out at them.

"...oh." Hinata breathed, looking around with wide eyes.

The room was unbelievably dusty. It probably hadn't been cleaned in years. But under a fine layer of rock dust, the room was... familiar. A work desk and a huge bed along the far wall and a closet full of old Iwa uniforms and a rather interesting pile of mismatched clothes in the bottom. The walls were decorated with old, faded sketches, of a variety of things. Animals, plants, mountains. But you could almost see the history, the progression; overtop most of the still-life drawings were designs. Designs of animals, mostly birds, with technical scribbles and notes in the margins, talking about clay.

And then there were the sculptures.

Dozens of them, all covered with dust and inanimate. More realistic than what they were used to seeing in clay, but perhaps they'd been simplified over time for practical use. But still with the signature hollow eyes, all of them staring at the floor forlornly.

"This... was Deidara's room." Neji stated the obvious, though he was possibly more confused than Hinata was. How were Deidara and Takamaru connected, then...?

--.-

"So, Takamaru, have you done *anything* since I left, yeah?" Deidara asked conversationally, looking around him eagerly. "Doesn't look like it..."

"Nope, haven't touched a thing," Takamaru replied with a beam.

There was a long pause, in which it was fun to watch the wheels turn between the ears. Then, with a jolt that only memory can bring, he yelped, "That's *my* room!"

"Yes, it is. But—hold it, kiddo." The taller of the two grabbed him by the back of the uniform, holding him still before he could go evict the other two from his old room. "Unless you're hiding something in there you shouldn't have had, it's fine."

"But... that's *my* room, yeah." Deidara replied pitifully, still trying to get loose. "Where am I going to sleep?"

"I don't know. Couch? I'm pretty sure the ceiling is still free. There are more rooms open. Without all of the creepy figures staring at you all night." Takamaru shuddered, finally releasing Deidara. He fell face-first onto the stone floor with a thump. "Have you gotten clumsier or lazier since I last saw you? The Deidara *I* knew wouldn't have ever even gotten into the position where he was restrained so easily."

"Yeah, well, the Deidara *you* knew has been dead for quite some time, yeah." he replied snappishly, sitting up and rubbing his cheek. He looked only mildly interested when his hand came away with a bit of blood, but then as an afterthought, remembered that his nose had been bleeding earlier. "Like, ever since you dumped me in the wilderness with that damned map—it took me a *year* to read that thing. A year! And that's with directions!"

"It's not my fault you can't read." Takamaru replied easily. Deidara, who was still sitting, reached over and hit him on the back of the knees, making the silver-haired man fall to the floor just in front of him.

"A *year*," he repeated firmly.

"Well... yeah, okay. So did it occur to the pretty little blonde that maybe I didn't want you fighting a Sannin so soon?" he asked as he sat up. He hastily made sure his hair was alright, and still in its ponytail. Luckily, it was, otherwise he probably would have had to beat Deidara for the principle of it. "You were still a little kid when I left you—"

"Dumped me in the wilderness," Deidara corrected.

Takamaru eyed him for a moment, and then continued. "*—left* you, and I didn't want you getting slaughtered for that guy's sport. And I was *still* worried when I heard that he'd been killed."

For Sasori, it seemed that his waiting had paid off. True, he didn't exactly like the way they treated each other or Takamaru's flippancy, but at least he knew a timeframe now. Just before Orochimaru died. Or rather, a year before.

"Why? You should have had a bit of faith in me. Sure, it was a hard as hell fight, but I still won. Because I am an artist, and Orochimaru was just a creepy old fucker who can do weird things with his tongue and snakes."

Sasori had to bite his tongue to stop himself from pointing out that Deidara had lost his 'yeah' again. So Deidara had been overconfident in that battle, too. But Sasori couldn't argue with the results. He'd been the one who had gone to visit his partner to find half the country destroyed. The destruction he'd caused had been rather complete, artist or not.

"Bah, you're just as annoying as ever. You're tired and it's making you pissy. Go to bed, Deidara." Takamaru ordered flatly, all traces of his smile gone. Sasori narrowed his eyes, looking away right when Takamaru decided to cast a sidelong glance in his direction. "Sasori-san, you can sleep wherever, just like the other two. The ceiling is still open."

And with that, the silver-haired man swept his ponytail over one shoulder, and sashayed off.

At that point, Deidara turned and grinned at Sasori like he hadn't heard anything out of the ordinary. "I don't know about you, but I'm not taking the ceiling, yeah—"

"Deidara, I don't know what game you're playing, but I want you to stop it. Now." Sasori interrupted in a low voice, still looking away. "I know you've told this Takamaru person more than he needs to know. And I swear to god, if you do so much as look at me the wrong way anytime

soon, I'll slit your throat."

Deidara blinked in surprise, taken aback. "What?" was all he could say.

Sasori cleared his throat, and then schooled his face into an expression of angelic innocence. He looked up at his partner with lidded brown eyes and a small smile, all traces of his previous anger gone. Except for his voice. "Deidara, I'm surprised. You've underestimated me. And overlooked obvious details."

"What do you mean?" At least he was a bit more articulate this time.

"One: you keep speaking to Takamaru in a language you think none of us know."

"You—"

"No, I don't, but I can pick out the basic idea of what you're saying. You *explained the mission* to him, Deidara! How did you think that we wouldn't catch onto that!"

"...We?" Deidara asked quietly, head drooping. "You told Bya-chan?"

"Yes. Neji too. Secondly, you obviously know the man. Which, while that is alarming in itself, it essentially harmless unless compounded by something else. Unfortunately, in this case, that something else is the fact that *he* is the one who pointed Orochimaru out to you. How much does he know about the Akatsuki?" Sasori demanded in a voice just as quiet as his partner's.

"Nothing, yeah. He—well, he knew I wanted to join, so he just pulled some strings and helped me find Orochimaru. It wasn't that hard to pick out a Sannin, you know..." Deidara said, gaining back a bit of his confidence.

Sasori, though, shook his head. "Deidara. I am not stupid, and it's ridiculous how you continually think that I am. He knows you—he knows your attacks and attacking style. You were telling him about Karura earlier. And I was Orochimaru's old partner. There's *no way* that you couldn't have dug up something on me if you were intelligent enough to pinpoint Orochimaru's actual location."

"We... we never got a name. And the only information we got on you wasn't about you—it was Hiruko, yeah," Deidara replied weakly. Sasori had advanced on him, and now the blonde was pressed up against the wall, staring down his nose at the shorter ninja. "That's all."

"No, it's not." Sasori actually chuckled, and shook his head again. "Deidara, you are still overlooking one very obvious fact. Takamaru *knew my name*. I never introduced myself, and you didn't do any introductions, either. How do you explain that?"

Deidara, when cornered, was liable to get hostile. Sasori knew this, and was even hoping for it. At this point, he would love a reason to kill his partner. It would solve so many of his problems in one move. Still, Sasori also knew that Deidara was prone to outmaneuver his opponents when cornered, and he had to be careful of that. He wasn't going to let Deidara get away from this one. So he was expecting it when the blonde smirked suddenly. "Sasori-danna, I introduced you all to him in that other language you're so obsessed with. Yes, I explained the mission to him. I asked him for help, yeah. We're working out a deal right now, but I think he'll help us."

"That's treason and you know it," Sasori pointed out, standing his ground. "Even if you know the man, and trust him, it doesn't mean we all can."

"Trust him? Danna, he practically *raised* me. I'd trust him with my life, easy. And since when does that apply? I trusted Bya-chan, and look where she is now. You may be jealous of her, but you said

so yourself. At one point, you trusted her with your life."

"It just backfired."

"Well... yeah... but still." Deidara momentarily fished around for something else to say, just to get his partner to stop glaring at him like that. "Takamaru, he's alright. Like you heard, we didn't exactly get to say goodbye. Just let me reconnect with him, yeah."

"What purpose would that serve? You're only going to get more attached—"

"No, trust me. A month."

"Tomorrow."

"Three weeks, yeah."

"Two days."

"Two weeks."

"A week."

"Deal, yeah." Deidara beamed, and Sasori mentally groaned. He knew he'd just lost that argument, because Deidara was turning him into a sap and he honestly couldn't resist when Deidara *pleaded*. Because that's what he really was doing. Or maybe he was just having a mid-life crisis and wanted to reconnect for those reasons. Sasori didn't know exactly how old Deidara was, but it stood to reason that he could.

Though what made him say that he'd just leave after a week? If he was spending that week to reminisce with Takamaru, wouldn't that only make it more difficult to leave him? Unless there was some outside force acting upon that.

And then, it all clicked.

"Oh god." Sasori breathed. Deidara didn't catch that, which was probably for the best.

Deidara *hadn't* been betraying them. He'd just been moving along the process, so he didn't have to go through all of that later and interrupt his Takamaru time. He only agreed to this 'deal'—which Sasori would have to ask about later—for an excuse to get closer to the other Iwa-nin. And while normally this would just make him jealous (maybe Deidara was right and he was a *bit* possessive), here Sasori just felt an unexpected and foreign emotion to him—pity.

Of course, that only lasted a moment or two. Sasori coughed and straightened his uniform, stepping away from his partner. He wouldn't make eye contact now. Nor would he admit he was wrong, or maybe he was just looking for an excuse to hate Deidara.

"Oh, while we're still on speaking terms, sorry for what I said then." Sasori almost looked up at him, but caught himself just in time.

Instead, still staring at his feet, he muttered, "What do you mean?"

"Uhh..." Sasori risked a peek upward, and was both surprised and amused to find Deidara blushing. He knew exactly what his partner was talking about, but it'd be interesting to hear it said aloud in the explosive user's own terms. "When... you were ignoring me, yeah? Since I said something stupid?"

Sasori was beginning to feel that pity again—damn that feeling—and quickly squashed it with a hurried, "Whatever. Just drop it."

The redhead stiffened slightly when he felt two arms wrap themselves around him, but forced himself to relax slightly. It was only a hug. Normally reflexes would have kicked in, but Sasori might have gotten a bit rusty. He was so unused to physical contact that normally his reflexes were based upon long-range movements. Which only served Deidara in this sense; he got to keep his heart beating. "Thanks for the week, yeah. And for not killing Takamaru." He even gave Sasori a peck on the cheek.

"I wish you'd stop alternating between antisocial and clingy," he complained flatly.

"What is it with you and the constants you crave? People change. That's life, Sasori-danna." Deidara replied in amusement. He was still half-leaning on Sasori, too.

"Changing is a constant in itself. But you—you're just plain unpredictable. It's rubbing off on Hinata as well, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't make her act just as bad as you. You're a bad influence, plain and simple."

"But then she has boring old sticks in the mud like you and Neji to even that out." Deidara let go of him, and straightened with a slight flush. "Well, goodnight, yeah. Since I suppose you'll be up all night sabotaging and debugging the place."

"Naturally."

Sasori watched him leave, and then sighed in relief. Deidara was now much more predictable, contrary to his words earlier. It helped to know what his aim was, though. And now, he just wanted to spend a week reminiscing and pretending like Takamaru was just another friend before they killed him.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: What is this 'deal' that Deidara mentioned? Plus, Sukeru, Takamaru's assistant, comes back with a surprise or two of her own. And Hinata finally finds out what's up with Deidara and Sasori...how will she respond?

A Need For Reconnecting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Okay, so here's the deal, kiddos," Takamaru declared, unrolling the Land of Earth map on the table. The other four crowded around it. Takamaru had to literally pick Deidara up and push him out of the circle so he could begin his explanation of their—or rather, *his*—situation. "We are here."

He put his finger on a small dot on the map with the air of pointing out something grand. When he didn't get the reaction he was expecting, he just sighed and continued with a bit less enthusiasm than before.

"Iwagakure is up here." He pointed to a marginally larger dot. "For the record, up in this area is where Deidara grew up. Isn't that right?" He turned over his shoulder to beam at Deidara, who shrugged.

"About, yeah."

"But we're not going to either of those places, of course. Well, you might, but I highly doubt it. Iwa itself isn't all that populated these days. Now, I don't know who you're after, but I'd bet that he or she is in the rural areas."

"Most likely." Sasori allowed, drumming his fingers on his arm. Neji nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, we'll do that later. Right now, I have a bit of a problem that Deidara said you'd all help me with."

Once upon a time, there was a boy. He was only twelve, but already he had been betrayed by everything he'd ever known or love. Family, friends, country... he had none now. His name was Deidara.

He wandered as far as the southern border of Iwa before anything happened. Of course, why should anything? He'd already totaled the ANBU force and most of Iwagakure. Even if the replacement Tsuchikage wanted to go after him, it'd take weeks to scrape together a proper team for that. Regardless of that knowledge, and the solace he took in it, the boy was found.

He was found by a muscular, taller shinobi with a mop of silver hair and dark eyes. His name was Takamaru. And when Takamaru found that dirty, grungy boy with the tearstained face, he had no idea what he was in for.

The first time they met, Deidara nearly killed Takamaru. Accidentally, too. Takamaru had come upon him and caught him by surprise, and the young missing-nin had detonated his bag of clay from shock alone. Which only left him singed, pissed and virtually defenseless. Takamaru, who was also slightly scorched from the blast, was amused at the kid's spunk.

"Let go of me, let go!" Deidara screeched and kicked as he was picked up by the back of his vest.

"Oi, kid, shut the hell up before I beat your face in." Takamaru shouted, which instantly quieted Deidara. It might have been that the kid didn't even come up to his shoulder, or it might have been the fact that he'd just made a chakra kunai and was waving it in front of his nose, but either way, it definitely shut the kid up.

He didn't exactly know what made him take the little artist in, but regardless of his rationale, the two hit it off soon after that. Maybe it was their shared love of raw destruction, or maybe their love of flight. (When Takamaru found out that the kid could *fly* on his bombs, he flipped out from sheer excitement.)

They soon fell into a symbiotic relationship. Deidara created the cavern that Takamaru moved in to, and helped him fine-tune his own flight 'jutsu'. (He also couldn't get enough of Takamaru's twisted chakra system. It amused him to no end.) In return, Takamaru taught the kid some practical earth-based jutsu, and told him that art was important, but it took less time to make a bird-*looking* bomb rather than an actual bird-bomb. It was then that Deidara started creating his own, unique, birds and other creations.

Takamaru also helped Deidara in his Akatsuki dream. He helped dig up the sparse records of a few of the known members, which, at that time, were very few and far between. He was also the one who figured that Deidara should go for Orochimaru, since he was the deviant of the group. He trained daily with Deidara, preparing him for the fight of his young life.

"I'm going to tell you bluntly that this is a personal dispute between Shinjiro and I. It's just not between he and I anymore." Takamaru said simply, spreading his hands out with a grin. "It was like the first Great Shinobi War. Friends came in and helped, stuff like that. The point of the matter is, it's a bit of a civil war down here in the south these days."

"So you think that this man was the one who caused the landslide?" Neji asked skeptically. It was clear he still didn't believe the whole 'can't use ninjutsu' bit about Takamaru (which was saying something, considering his teammate had been Rock Lee). On that subject, Takamaru *had* promised to give them a proper explanation with examples, but that had yet to happen.

"I'm pretty much positive. It's his idea of a good time to pick off stragglers in that canyon. Which is here." He pointed to another spot on the map which consisted of nothing but a bunch of squiggly lines. "Notice that it's roughly the midway point between my house and his little 'secret' hideaway."

"So you know exactly where he is. Why not just ambush him?" Neji inquired.

It seemed that he and Takamaru were doing most of the talking here. But not that he could blame the conversation on anyone, really. Hinata was busy being her usual quiet self, just listening in. Sasori and Deidara were pretending to listen, but occasionally Neji would see one of them whisper something to the other, so he assumed they were in their own discussion. Plus, he had to admit that he was starting to get interested in this situation. Ninja strategy was always an absorbing topic.

"Honestly, do you think I'm stupid enough *not* to have thought of that before?" Takamaru chuckled darkly, pulling on one of his bangs. "It's almost gotten to be a type of game with us. Tag, with

ambushes and other assorted traps. Neither of us can do much damage, though..."

"He lives in a mountain as well?"

"The side of that canyon, actually. Not where you guys passed, but pretty near there," he informed. "But we haven't had an actual *fight* in years."

"Which is what you want us to do." Neji remarked shrewdly. "Though it is a personal dispute."

"All's fair in love and war. Even a pampered little Leaf-nin like you should know that." Takamaru replied smoothly, grin still firmly in place. The brunette opposite him scowled, rolling his eyes. "But he's already dragged those hawks of his in, and then a few other foreigners and stuff. It's always been just me 'n Sukeru here, so it's about time I evened the odds."

"...Aren't two Akatsuki members and two Hyuuga overkill, then?"

"I *really* don't like Shinjiro."

"That's apparent." Sasori interjected with a tiny smile. "So this Shinjiro, he's an Iwa-nin like you?"

"*Ex*-Iwa-nin, thank you," he sniffed primly. Deidara laughed at this, but turned it into a cough when Takamaru turned to eye him. "And I think so. I never bothered to learn."

"And you say he's a hawk summoner." Neji supplied.

"Yeah, I say that, but it's also pretty obvious when the man is never seen without one of the damned birds."

"So aside from earth jutsus and flight capabilities, he's nothing spectacular?"

"I'd like to see *you* try to catch him. Deidara and I are the only ones who can fly in this room, unless one of you three is hiding a pair of wings under those baggy shirts of yours. Mostly I just need him. But some ground support would be nice."

"Why only him, then?" Sasori asked, narrowing his eyes. "You said so yourself; you can fly."

Takamaru huffed and rolled his eyes. "We are about even in speed. So neither of us can ever catch the other. But if little Deidara has made it into your Akatsuki, then he's bound to be faster than us both, right? I'm sure he's had some kind of speed training..."

Deidara looked slightly sick at the mere memory of his training. "Yeah..."

"So then it's settled." Takamaru beamed at the group, rolling up his map. The others gave him blank stares.

"...*What* is settled? All you've done is recap your struggle with Shinjiro and told us that you need Deidara." Neji deadpanned.

"Oh, so you're one of those controlling types that needs to know every little detail of the plan, huh?" Takamaru paused for a moment, thoughtful. "Well then... How about attack in a week, just before sundown? That way his birds won't be able to see as well as us, and since we'll be coming in from the west, it'll only give us that much more of an advantage."

"Uh—sooner." Deidara said haltingly, raising his hand slightly. "A week is... too long to wait, yeah."

Takamaru looked at him with the same curious expression he'd given Neji the day before. After too long of a moment for it to not be awkward, he finally blinked and stated, "Okay then."

And that was that.

The rest of the day was spent doing absolutely nothing under the guise of preparation. The fight was to be six days from then, only a day earlier, but after a shouting match, Deidara had had to back down. One day compensation was all he'd get.

So the day was expended with show and tell. This had both Hyuuga skittish, but Sasori seemed completely indifferent to the thought, so they let it slide. Takamaru claimed that this was research, so he could think of a suitable plan to use against Shinjiro. Even so, the allegedly harmless demonstration of their jutsus soon turned bloody when he remarked to Hinata, "Nice bounce," after one of her jumps. Deidara and Sasori had to intervene to pull her and Neji off of the poor man.

After that Takamaru quickly decided to move on to Sasori.

"Pass," he said flatly. Takamaru opened his mouth to retort, but the redhead sent him such a glare that he quickly shut it and turned to Deidara. Sasori smirked then, pleased with himself.

"Well, I've already seen yours—"

"No you haven't!" Deidara protested. He'd gotten all worked up waiting for his turn to show off, something he usually didn't get to do with permission. "You haven't seen *anything* from my new collection, yeah!"

Takamaru rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Fine. Show me what you can do."

"Okay, well first—turn around." Deidara took the taller man by the shoulders and bodily turned him around. "Don't look."

"What am I not looking at?"

The other three watched disinterestedly as Deidara made a Karura, and then stealthily snuck off. Neji, personally, knew that if he hadn't watched the process, he'd never have been able to tell that it wasn't the real thing. Aside from the glare on the bomb's face, it looked exactly like Deidara. When Takamaru didn't get a reply from the blonde, he turned to peek over one shoulder.

"...And what is this supposed to be?"

"Why don't you try to attack him and find out?" Sasori asked innocently. "We'll see how fast you can run, at any rate."

"So it's a bomb, huh?" He strolled over, inspecting Karura. It glared stoically ahead the entire time. Takamaru poked it experimentally, and the clone grabbed his hand and held it still with a scowl. "Nasty temperament. So it explodes, and then what?"

"And then you die." Sasori replied. "You can't dodge that bomb; it's get out of the area or die. Surely Deidara's favorite piece of his ersatz art, though I haven't seen one that's lasted more than five minutes in a fight. He usually uses it as a parlor trick, as you've seen."

"...Fake art? What, you're some sort of art critic?" Takamaru jerked his hand away from Karura, stepping back from the sculpture as he did so.

Sasori gave him a smirk. "In a way. Think of me as Deidara's personal and perpetual critic."

"Okay, whatever. So where is the little blonde brat, then?"

"Undoubtedly hiding somewhere."

"...Why?"

"Because I would imagine that he wants you to use your 'jutsu' to find him and show us what it is." Sasori explained impatiently with a sigh.

Takamaru pouted. "So he's already told you?"

"Only me, and it was very vague. I'm sure it will impress regardless," he said with a hint of sarcasm. Takamaru stuck his tongue out at him in response; it was now obvious where Deidara had gotten the immature comeback tactic.

"Fine then."

Yet again, Takamaru started making seals, though it appeared to just be a random bunch. At least, Neji had never seen that sequence before. He activated his Byakugan at about the third sign, and noticed immediately that Takamaru's chakra was *not* behaving normally. Instead of taking on any kind of nature or identification of what kind of jutsu he was trying to perform, the chakra was just... moving. It wasn't even to his hands, either, like the *Juuken* style. It was moving up through his chest and back out his shoulder blades, it looked like. From his current angle, he couldn't be too sure.

Then, the Hyuuga prodigy tasted raw chakra in the air and recoiled slightly. Beside him, he saw Hinata do the same. Only Sasori seemed unfazed. What appeared to be pure chakra was leaking out of Takamaru's body, slowly flowing into recognizable shapes. At first, Neji thought it might be some kind of sword. But as more of the things appeared, he saw that it was taking on the form of crude feathers.

He was making wings out of pure chakra.

But unlike Chouji's butterfly wings, these were hard. Solid. Pure white, too. If they had been clear they'd probably be able to pass as diamonds.

Then the chakra movement inside the Iwa-nin's body halted, and the wings stayed still for a moment, probably to solidify. Neji frowned. If they were as solid as they looked, wouldn't they just freeze like that? Nothing more than bulky hindrances that looked pretty.

With a small crackle, Takamaru stretched. First his arms, and then his new chakra-wings. A few of the feathers dropped to the ground, already shed, but they seemed mobile enough. Neji's frown darkened slightly. *Alright, so they are movable. But there's no way that they can be light or strong enough to let him actually fly. A bird's feathers are hollow and made of thin fibers, and that is just... solid*, he thought sullenly.

"Well? What do you think?" Takamaru beamed at them, extending his wings for their viewing pleasure.

Hinata spoke up almost instantly. Like her cousin, she had her Byakugan active. "Are they really as dense as they look?"

"Probably. How dense do they look?"

She sighed, and rephrased the question. "They look as if they're made of chalk. Are they as hard as

chalk?"

Takamaru stooped—a bit awkwardly, demonstrating that the chakra-made feathers were definitely not hollow like a bird's—and picked up one of the smaller feathers. He tossed it at her. Hinata looked at it for a few moments with her bloodline limit active, turning it over in her hands. Even if it was one of the smaller ones from his wings, it was still nearly the length of her forearm. She tried to break it, but it didn't budge. Frowning in concentration, she tried a bit harder, but it still didn't do anything. Soon Hinata was trying everything she could to snap the thing.

Neji decided to take it from her before she hurt herself with it.

Curiosity took over and he tried to break it himself. After all, he was male, so he possessed much more physical strength than she did. Even so, he didn't feel it give in the least. Hinata watched him reproachfully as he attempted to crack it. Takamaru was watching gleefully, contrasting with her frown.

"Let me try." Sasori said.

"Hold on." Neji replied, turning it over in his hands. Maybe brute strength wasn't the key here. It was only made of chakra, anyway, and who knew chakra better than the Hyuuga clan? He gathered a small amount of chakra into his fingertips and pressed down. Nothing. Now getting slightly frustrated, he pushed a bit more than was strictly necessary into his hands and down into the feather. He dropped it hastily as his own chakra rebounded on him and scorched his hands. "Ouch, shit. That's never happened before..."

"Even you guys with the white eyes should know that foreign chakra doesn't mix well with your own." Takamaru chuckled, wings fluttering. Neji sourly kicked the feather over in Sasori's direction, nursing his burnt hands.

The puppeteer picked it up and examined it closely. After a few minutes of just staring at the thing, he furrowed his brow, and then snapped it as easily as if it really was chalk.

The other three were stunned into silence, particularly Takamaru. "But... that's never happened before! No one person can break my chakra!"

"Neji-san had weakened it slightly along this line with his chakra, so I just pushed my own chakra into that crack to make it break." Sasori clarified, holding up the two pieces.

"Then why didn't you get—"

"I did. I just didn't want to feel it." He moved the broken feather to reveal slight burn marks on his fingers, all the while maintaining his poker face. "Regardless, a normal person wouldn't have been able to break it, especially under battle circumstances. Looks like your wings won't be clipped."

"Though they are rather heavy..." Neji started, shaking his hands through the air to try to cool them off a bit. "You can't possibly actually *fly*... can you?"

"Not... exactly. Like I can't just flap my wings and lift off. I need to jump from somewhere. But once I'm airborne I actually can fly." Takamaru grinned triumphantly, planting both fists on his hips.

"I imagine it'd be fairly easy to knock you out of the sky."

"Not as easy as you'd think."

"Then surely it's quite a strain on your body?"

"That one's true. Otherwise I'd be flying around constantly, like Deidara. Speaking of such, I see you up there." Takamaru glanced upward. Neji and Hinata had earlier spotted the hovering blonde and his bird, but hadn't wanted to give anything away. "Get back down here!"

"No, yeah!" came the distance-muffled reply.

Takamaru and Sasori sighed in unison. It was Takamaru, however, who continued. "Deidara, I'm telling you to get your skinny little ass down here before I go up there and get you!"

"Make me!"

"That's it, brat, I will!"

As they were on top of Takamaru's mountain, it was fairly easy for him to find a place to jump off of. He had already been on the edge of the rock, and just fell backwards with his arms crossed. A few moments later and with a loud flap of his wings, he rose into the sky and began his pursuit of Deidara on his bird.

"So his chakra solidifies upon contact with the air..." Sasori mused, watching their aerial game of tag. "I wonder how that happened."

"Bloodline limit?" Hinata suggested.

"No. His chakra system is just irregular, possibly tampered with in some way." Neji replied, still scowling at his burnt hands. He was not going to be in a happy mood because of that, needless to say.

"Deidara said that Takamaru had been like that ever since they met, so it's most likely that he was just born like that." Sasori said simply, shrugging. "I'd like to see Kakuzu try to break some of those feathers of his, though..."

"Why? You broke it easily enough." the brunette said snappishly.

"I cheated. One, you had assisted me with creating the first crack, however minor. Second, I actually put some of my poison on that line. It weakens chakra. And then I quite simply snapped it."

"So all that about you pushing your own chakra into it was just crap?" Hinata asked disapprovingly.

"Yes, it was all crap." Sasori replied with a smile. "Takamaru doesn't exactly need to know all that much about me, now does he? You two he could look up in any bloodline limit book, probably the first chapter. I, on the other hand, am unique and don't plan on sharing most of my skills with a stranger who will have no sensible use for them."

Hinata looked miffed at being used as bait to sate Takamaru's curiosity, and Neji couldn't exactly blame her, even if Sasori's comments made sense. She turned to him, apparently ignoring Sasori (again), and asked, "How are your hands?"

"They'll be fine." Just so she couldn't check and throw a fit—because actually they did hurt quite a bit, but he had no one to blame but himself (and Takamaru)—he shoved them in his pockets and smiled disarmingly. "Thank you for the concern, but it's unnecessary."

Hinata looked up at him levelly, though she didn't look happy. "Then I suppose I'm just unnecessary up here. I'm going inside." With that, she turned on her heel and stormed back to the rooftop door.

Sasori chuckled, and Neji turned to him with a growl. "Like *you've* never messed up with Deidara, Sasori-san ." And as the redhead looked like he'd been slapped, the brunette hastily departed to try to track down Hinata before she got too angry with him.

-.-.-

Hinata wished that she could be like Sasori, just that once. Then Neji wouldn't be able to find her with his Byakugan. Or maybe she should wish that they weren't Hyuuga. That was probably a safer fancy. But regardless of her wishing, she didn't want to deal with him right now.

First he sent that letter with that mention of a ring. (And then Itachi and Kisho, but while that wasn't connect directly to him, it still served to annoy her to no end.) But then he didn't speak of it again, and he'd been back for a few days now. And now he was just pissed off because Takamaru was... Takamaru. And probably slightly irked at Sasori, but then again, she could at least understand that. At least Deidara was relatively behaving himself so far on the mission.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Go away," she called, laying on the bed. Hinata briefly considered hiding under the blankets, just to show how angry she was when he inevitably came in, but decided that it'd be too immature and too much hassle.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought Takamaru-san was in here." Instead of Neji's voice, it was a female voice. Hinata sat bolt upright, both startled at this newcomer and the fact that she'd just been so rude. Mostly it was curiosity that compelled her to rush to the door and throw it open.

"I'm so sorry, I had thought you were someone else..." Hinata's voice died in her throat. Mostly because she *knew* this woman, and this woman should *not* be here.

-.-.-

It had been approximately two years since Deidara had seen Takamaru last. And that last meeting hadn't exactly been a fond farewell.

Takamaru had spent the last year of their time together prepping him for taking on an Akatsuki member, namely Orochimaru. As he was a Sannin, as long as you had access to Konoha information, he was relatively easy to research. He had a massive array of jutsus, but he usually only used a sparse few (mostly snake-related). Deidara, being a long-range specialist, would probably fare better than most against him.

So one day, he somehow talked a sleepy blonde into getting up before noon. He knew that Deidara wouldn't ever *really* leave him; he was subconsciously (and unrealistically) expecting Takamaru to continue helping him. Plus they didn't know where Orochimaru was—or Deidara didn't—so he

wasn't exactly leaving on his own anytime soon. Takamaru knew he had to get rid of the kid before he just stagnated. After all, there was only so much you could learn from one man, especially a man who couldn't have made a bomb to save his life.

Deidara rolled out of bed that day and was practically asleep standing up. Takamaru couldn't help but smile at what his twelve-year-old kid had turned into. Over half a decade later, and you get *this* Deidara. Tall, skinny but toned (probably from all of the heavy lifting Takamaru made him do, as he was too lazy to do it himself), and stubborn as one of his goats. Typical teenager. Right now, the blonde's head was lolling to one side, and his mouth was open. He'd probably be drooling, too, if his head hadn't fallen back at that moment. He fell back onto his bed before Takamaru could say another word.

"Deidara, get the hell up. Today we're going to Iwa."

That got him up. "*What*, yeah?! Why the hell would we do that?!"

Deidara was as anti-Iwa as they got. Ever since he'd been kicked out and decimated half the village, he'd sworn to never return until he was Akatsuki. (Then he would return to decimate the other half, in addition to the rebuilt half.) Takamaru smirked.

"*Because*. Supplies, idiot."

"Can't we go somewhere else, then?" Deidara whined, already drooping again. Takamaru had to reach over and haul him back upright by the ponytail, lest he fall asleep *again*.

"Where?"

"Why not some other village, yeah? I hear Konoha is pretty accommodating with their exports."

It was almost too easy.

They flew on one of Deidara's clay birds, as usual. After all, even mountain goats got tired with cross-country journeys. Flight was so much faster. And necessary if Takamaru was to dump the kid. Once they got over the Iwa border, he put his plan in motion.

He stealthily (which was saying something, considering he was making *wings*, for god's sake) created his chakra-wings, which both created drag and more weight for the clay bird. It struggled beneath them to accommodate the sudden changes. Deidara looked down at the clay in alarm, just as Takamaru plucked out one of his longer flight feathers.

The blue-eyed artist turned around with large eyes, just in time for a rough shove. He tumbled over backwards off of the bird, already reaching up for it to swoop down and catch him. The bird dived down low enough for Deidara to catch its foot, but Takamaru just decapitated it before Deidara could regain complete control.

"Here!" Takamaru likewise jumped off the bird, plunging down until he was falling beside Deidara. The blonde shouted at him, but the silver-haired man pretended that the swearing was lost in the wind. He reached out and grabbed Deidara's flailing arm, halting his freefall.

"What the *hell* was that, Takamaru?!" Deidara yelled at him shrilly, probably shaken from the fall.

"Don't worry, I caught you."

"You killed my bird!"

"And I'll kill you too if you're not careful." he replied callously. He flew them both farther away from the Earth border, out over sands and sparse trees. Probably somewhere near the Wind border. Hopefully that'd slow him down. Of course, the extra weight made their flight more like a long glide, and Takamaru knew he'd be feeling this tomorrow. Oh well, it was necessary.

"What are you doing...?" Deidara asked, below him. He was still suspended by both wrists over the sand below them. He'd also calmed down, probably assessing the situation.

"I'm going to give you a map to Orochimaru. I don't want to see you again until you're wearing his cloak, got that? I'll kill you if I see you without it." Takamaru replied as roughly as he could. He glanced down at Deidara, and instantly regretted it. He just looked *hurt*.

"...oh."

And since Takamaru couldn't take the wounded note in the boy's voice, he dropped him. The sand would cushion his fall. Probably. As an afterthought, he dug the map he'd made out of his pocket, dropping it down after him. Hopefully the wind wouldn't carry it too far away from Deidara.

"See you, kid! Don't come back until you're wearing that uniform!" he called below with a grin and a wink. He could barely make out Deidara flipping him off among the sand. He looked a lot redder than earlier, too; he'd probably had a rough landing. Maybe he had landed on his head.

"Next time I see you, I'll kill you!" he heard him shout.

"I'll do the same, don't worry!" And for good measure, Takamaru returned the gesture, and then saluted as he soared off.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Who is this woman that Hinata has found? More importantly, will she be a hindrance or a help to this mission? Is she another enemy, or a friend? Regardless, the six-day deadline comes closer. Takamaru doesn't seem fazed, but Deidara can't help but think that the entire thing is too easy...

A Ring and Three Lines

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What are *you* doing here?" Both kunoichi squealed at the same time, backing up and pointing at each other. The other woman regained herself faster than Hinata, and hurriedly said in a high voice, "Takamaru was supposed to *kill* you all! Why are you actually here?!"

"What *we're* doing here?! You should know that; we're on a mission!" Hinata replied, warily watching the woman across the hall from her. More likely than not, this was going to turn into a fight very soon.

"A—oh my god. You mean *Sasori* is here, too?" she asked. Her voice suddenly went from shrill to hushed.

Hinata smirked (something she wasn't exactly used to) and nodded. "Yes. So I expect he'll be coming inside soon, and I doubt he'll be very pleased to see you here."

"Takamaru-san can take him. He can take both of the Akatsuki-nin, and I'll kill you and the other white-eyed freak before you can alert them." The woman snarled, whipping a few shuriken and a scroll out of her chuunin vest pocket. Hinata took a step back; she hadn't been expecting it to get physical so quickly. But no matter. If this woman was only a chuunin, at least it would be a fair fight.

"Deidara-kun could kill Takamaru easily, and Sasori-san is even stronger than he is." Hinata replied loyally. "And Neji is a jounin, so you can't kill him. You can't defeat me, either!" Before the black-haired woman could reply, Hinata made her seals and shouted, "*Utakata no jutsu!*"

The woman reacted upon her words alone and threw the shuriken. But they just thudded into the wall harmlessly behind her as Hinata dispersed into a flock of ravens. The Hyuuga kunoichi silently pulled out a few of her own shuriken as she hid in among the illusionary birds, and watched for the right time to strike. The woman looked back and forth, her blue-green eyes trying to see through the genjutsu. Hinata knew she wouldn't be able to; if even Itachi resorted to this jutsu for cover, not just anyone would be able to dispel it.

Then, Hinata felt herself pulled backwards by the shirt. She glimpsed the woman being yanked in the same direction before she was turned around to stare fearfully into angry brown eyes. "*What* are you two doing?!" Sasori demanded, holding both kunoichi apart to prevent further fighting.

"Sa-Sasori-sama, she-she just attacked me! Started babbling something about a mission, and—"

"*Bullshit*, Kyoko. I know Hinata and she wouldn't start a fight if her life depended on it." Sasori snapped. Hinata tried to hit him, just to prove him wrong, but he jerked her out of arm's reach before she made contact. At least it got his attention. "Anyway. What are you doing here?"

"I... nothing?" The woman's name was Kyoko, then. Hinata just knew her as Sasori's subordinate, of course. Kyoko looked down shamefacedly, as if being caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Though this could potentially be much more fatal.

Sasori studied her for a moment, and then his eyes widened in realization. "You're Sukeru, aren't you?"

"I go by that now, yes," she replied defiantly.

Hinata looked at Kyoko-turned-Sukeru incredulously. "*You* are the one Takamaru-san has been going on about? You're his assistant?"

Sasori turned to her sharply, and relinquished his grasp on her. "Hime, you can go now. I'll handle *Sukeru*, don't worry. Just... don't tell the other two about this until I've had a chance to do some damage control."

Hinata figured that the man was just embarrassed that his subordinate had been caught living with Deidara's old mentor, so she shrugged it off. "...Fine."

She turned to walk away, but Sasori called, "Neji was last seen in that corridor." Without replying, Hinata turned on her heel and walked in the opposite direction.

-.-.-

Oh, Sukeru knew she was in for it. She was in for a world of pain—and that was if she got off lucky. Sasori had never been known for his mercy, though. She had known all along that Takamaru had been their target, but she'd merely been counting on the fact that he would kill them upon discovery. Akatsuki or not, they couldn't stand up to his chakra weapons.

But instead, here they were. Apparently all four of them, safe and sound. And alive. And judging by the way that girl—Hinata?—had been talking, they hadn't killed Takamaru yet. Which meant that they were staying with them with consent, oddly enough. Sukeru knew her place, and it wasn't to question, but if she was about to die, then she wanted some answers!

"Kyoko, listen to me." Sasori said quietly, dropping his voice to a low growl.

"A-Actually, it *is* Sukeru now. At least according to all the records Iwa has of me."

He sighed, and let go of her. She stumbled back, though more to get out of arm's length than to actually regain her balance. "When I told you to recreate all records of your life before you became my spy, I didn't exactly plan on you changing your name."

"Still, Sukeru. Please, Sasori-sama." she replied meekly. She'd gotten attached to the name... it was better than Kyoko, at any rate. (Which hadn't been her real name, either, but it was the one Sasori had first caught her with.)

For a moment, he looked ready to argue. Or hit her, whichever. But he just sighed again, and said, "Fine." She perked up slightly in hope. Maybe she'd escape with her life after all. "Sukeru, then."

She didn't dare reply, though. She'd probably only get herself into deeper shit if she tried. Plus she didn't know how angry he was.

It took a few, long minutes, but finally the puppet master spoke again. Much to her relief. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you now." Okay, maybe not a whole lot of relief with that. Sukeru's face fell, and she scrambled around mentally for some remark that might save her life.

She came up with nothing.

She didn't know Sasori all that well, so she couldn't come up with anything that might appease him. Frankly, she only had her sparse mission reports sent bi-yearly, and hadn't seen him (two days ago excluded) in over a year beforehand. She didn't have a lot to go off of here. "Mmm... Because... that wouldn't serve a purpose aside from bloodying your hands?"

"I could kill you without spilling a drop of blood."

Sukeru didn't doubt that. "...Then... Because that would make Takamaru-san suspicious when I don't come home and you don't need him to be suspicious of you?" Maybe logic would work here, then.

"That's a bit better, but I still have Deidara to use against Takamaru. Try again." She wondered how Deidara could be used against Takamaru. Did he have some way to combat his chakra-based weapons?

"...I have no idea then, Sasori-sama. I suppose I'm at your mercy." she admitted reluctantly, taking a deep breath. Maybe he'd just snap her neck and that'd be the end of it. Yeah, right. That'd be an act of mercy for him.

Sasori chuckled, instead. Sukeru reopened a blue-green eye, exhaling slowly. "I'll spare you, because you've been useful in the past and you're still my only link to Iwagakure. Plus... you're only the second of my subordinates to break free of my little leash jutsu."

She paled, breath hitching for a moment. *He—He can tell that just by looking?* she thought despairingly. When she had been assigned to Takamaru, he'd broken the jutsu for her, freeing her mind. She had no idea who the second ninja was who managed to escape from the jutsu's mind control; undoubtedly he or she would have to be very strong to do it on their own. "I—I—"

"Relax. I'm not going to put it back on your mind. Too much strain and too much bother. Plus, it seems that Takamaru would pick up on that, and *that* is what would make him suspicious." Sasori raised a hand and placed it on her shoulder. Sukeru tensed at the contact, eyes widening. "However..."

She couldn't bring herself to ask what that 'however' might mean. She'd already been spared her life and her mind; what was he going to take from her?

"Think of this as a smaller version of that control jutsu you were so used to. I wouldn't want you telling Takamaru about our mission, now would I?"

"I-I'd never tell him—" Even he recognized this as a blatant lie.

"I'm just going to wipe that part of your memory. It's just like modifying your behavior, only you will not remember that Takamaru is our target. Just a precaution, Sukeru. Because I *know* you would never betray me..."

-.-.-

Hinata was successfully avoiding Neji while simultaneously wondering what was up with that woman—Kyoko? Sukeru?—and Sasori. When she'd teased him about having some sort of relationship with her earlier, she hadn't actually *meant* it. But there was no way that Sasori was that angry just because he met up with her randomly and unexpectedly. Was there something going on

between them? Was Takamaru involved, somehow? What had Sasori meant when he said 'damage control'...?

Hinata was too confused with that. Sasori had seemed rather introverted, yes, but not exactly mysterious. Though she supposed that he did have a right to a social life outside of the Akatsuki and Deidara. But she had never seen that woman before they met up with her at the border, and they had known Sasori for almost a year. He was almost always with Deidara, too, and she was almost always with Deidara, so surely one of them would have caught on if he was having some sort of relationship.

"Hmm..." Hinata hummed to herself, turning a corner in the maze-like house. She was having fun getting herself (pretend) lost, and plus it would hopefully keep Neji away for a few more minutes. The Byakugan was sometimes cheating.

Did Sasori even have the drive to pursue any relationships? He didn't seem like he liked much social interaction. Moreover... how could someone *put up* with him?

"Bah, he can go live his own life for all I care..." Hinata threw her hands in the air in exasperation, leaning against the nearest wall as she brought them back down to cross haughtily over her chest. "That's it; I'm done. I'm not going to fret over Sasori's life anymore. He can go die for all I care. ... Though..." *I wonder if Deidara-kun knows about that woman.*

Deidara could probably get some ounce of truth out of Sasori. He was the only one who could get anything honest out of the redhead, it seemed. Determined now, Hinata turned around and started back the way she came. She was on a mission. Well, two, technically. But the other one was put on hold since they didn't know their target and they were still helping Takamaru with his little dispute.

Unfortunately, she'd nearly forgotten why she was heading in that direction in the first place. And by the time she'd realized it, Neji had already caught up with her. Hinata huffed and tried turning around, but his stare held her stationary. So instead she tried her best to frown and look angry.

"I got you a ring." He said it without much emotion, just stating a fact. And to prove it, he held up a small, silver circle between his thumb and index finger.

"Sasori said that you worded it that way just so it'd grab my attention and embarrass me," she replied dispassionately.

"I like to grab your attention. And how else was I suppose to word it?" Neji asked with a wry smile. "I wasn't aware I was doing something wrong."

"...Next time, just surprise me." Hinata looked away, frowning for real now. She couldn't stay angry at him, no matter how much she wanted to. She tried to hold on to her irritation, but it just slipped away after only a few moments.

"Do you still want it?" he inquired mildly. "It's not remarkably decorative, but I'm fairly certain it's real silver. If you wanted to, you could humor me now by taking it, and sell it later."

"You know I wouldn't do that," she mumbled halfheartedly. Hinata sighed, and returned her gaze to his. "How did you get it? I won't take it if you bought another present for me just like that."

"I didn't buy it, because I knew you wouldn't let me." He was smirking, which brought back some small scrap of her earlier indignation. "It actually belonged to the wife of the man I was killing. She ended up dying as well, and I thought it was just too pretty of a ring to let rot with her body."

She snorted back a laugh. "How romantic, niisan."

"Am I trying to be romantic?" he asked seriously. Hinata gave him a flat stare, and he relented with the somber façade. "I thought you had stopped calling me 'niisan', though..."

"It's a deep-rooted habit." She smiled brightly at him to cover her blush. "Don't tell me you don't like it..."

"Fine, call me what you wish. I'll just have you know that I'm reverting back to calling you 'Hinata-sama', though."

"I'm not the heir anymore, so you don't have grounds on which to base that title," she replied tactfully.

"Habit." He smirked at her again. Then, Neji held up the ring, glancing at it. "Would you like this ring, Hinata-sama?"

"Depends on what kind of ring it is, Neji-niisan." Hinata answered, careful. One of the biggest rules of dating was when receiving gifts—*especially* rings—know exactly what they mean.

He looked thoughtful. "...What kind of ring would you like it to be?"

Hinata sighed mentally. Now *she* would have to decide? That was unfair. But if that's how he wanted to play... "A normal ring. Just a little circle of silver, no attachments whatsoever."

His face fell, but so slightly and so quickly that she couldn't have been sure of it at all. He was good at controlling his expression like that. Neji tossed the ring across the hallway they were standing in, and she deftly caught it. Hinata held it up to the light, turning it so that the metal caught different angles of light. "Thank you," she murmured, trying it on. For a dead woman's ring, it fit her finger perfectly.

"Am I forgiven now?" Neji asked, raising an eyebrow. Hinata made a face; there went that happy moment. She copied Deidara's usual tactic and stuck her tongue out at him, crossing her arms in front of her chest. He just stared back at her impassively until she relented with the immature response.

"Fine... I suppose. But I swear, if you ever scare me like that again, I'm never speaking to you again. And I'll move back in with Deidara-kun."

He pretended to groan and hang his head. "And I *just* got you away from him," he despaired. Hinata couldn't help but chuckle. Neji looked up at her, grinning. "Why did it scare you?"

She hastily looked away and stammered out, "No reason!"

-.-.-

Deidara and Takamaru didn't come back until late into the night. By that time, they were both exhausted, sweaty, dirty, windblown, and starving. (And slightly scorched, in Takamaru's case. He'd gotten too close to one of the blonde's birds when it detonated.) Deidara kept his growling stomach somewhat quiet with the thought of Takamaru's cooking, which, in his *humble* opinion, was the best in the world.

"When do we get to eat, yeah?" he asked, slumping over onto the nearest object. Luckily it turned

out to be the couch. Unluckily, there was already someone on it.

"What are you doing." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Sasori sighed and closed the book he'd been trying to read, since that was now impossible with a Deidara leaning on his shoulders.

"Waiting for proper caloric sustenance to revitalize my body's cells with. Yeah," he replied, rotating his head so he could see what book Sasori was reading. Old Iwa ANBU records. Typical. "Do you ever read *good* books?"

"I've already read all of the *good* books, Deidara. There's not that many and I've been reading for a long time. Furthermore, these are generally more interesting." Sasori paused and reopened the book, flipping through the pages and then finally finding the name he was looking for. "This man, right here. I've fought him before. He's actually in my puppet collection as of now. I like looking for coincidences like that. It's like it reminds me just how wonderful and unending my art really is."

Deidara huffed as he rolled his eyes. "I thought you'd toned down the art crap, Sasori-danna. Or at least saw things my way, since *my* art is *so* much better—"

"Shut your mouth before I shut it for you. *You've* also toned down on the art crap, so I was holding out hope for the same. And if you think I would convert to *your* dismal excuse for fireworks, then you are underestimating my integrity as an artist."

"Yeah, well—"

"Sukeru!" Takamaru crowed, overly loud. He leaned over on Deidara's back to get a better look at the black-haired kunoichi. She looked up from her own book, as if just noticing that Takamaru was in the room. Instantly she broke out into a bright grin with a matching slight flush.

Unfortunately, Takamaru was rather well-built, so thus he was also rather heavy. Add Deidara's weight and it was a miracle Sasori stayed upright that long. The three ninja fell into a pile on the couch, ruining any nice entry he might have had with Sukeru. Regardless, Takamaru instantly perked up, sticking his head up out of the pile of limbs, chirping, "When did you get back?"

"Earlier today," she replied, smiling slipping slightly as she watched the men untangle themselves.

Deidara also poked his head out from under Sasori's arm, taking a few moments, but recognizing her nonetheless. "...You!"

Sukeru's smile faltered, and she glanced back and forth between Sasori and Takamaru apprehensively. Sasori spoke up next, somehow sliding out from under the other two without messing up anything other than his hair. "No need to worry, Deidara. I've already taken care of it. Takamaru, though it doesn't directly affect you, we've all already met Sukeru-san here before. She actually works for me."

"...Say what? Uh, no she doesn't."

"Yes, she does."

"No, she doesn't."

"Yes she does."

"No she doesn't."

"Yes—"

"A-Actually, I... do," she mumbled, hiding her face with her hair. Takamaru looked at her for a long moment—again the *same* look he gave Neji and Deidara previously—and then shrugged.

"Okay."

Again, he was *too* easygoing to be normal. But all the same, that was the end of that. He took it in stride, figuring (and proclaiming) that since she hadn't undermined him yet, he'd continue trusting her. Sukeru beamed at this announcement, cheeks still tinged pink.

-.-.-

The days passed... not normally, but the closest semblance of 'normal' a houseful of shinobi could accomplish.

Of course, this included, but was not limited to, some vaguely interesting events.

Sukeru's normal outfit of choice seemed to be confined to the skimpiest, most revealing articles of clothing she had in her closet at the time. Maid uniforms, concubine's kimonos, short shorts, miniscule skirts, tiny tube tops and fishnet galore were what most of them got to see her in. Worse, she seemed to operate under the impression that *all* female creatures should dress exactly like her, and spent most of her time trying to con Hinata into wearing different outfits.

"Why would you want to wear something as revealing as that?" Neji had the misfortune of asking one time.

Hinata shrugged, holding up the sad excuse for a kimono Sukeru had handed her. "I don't know, but sometimes they can be quite comfortable. This might be a bit much, though..."

"...Are you speaking from experience?" he asked in a low voice, narrowing his eyes.

Deidara was the main catalyst for the event. He had happened to walk by, and said rather loudly, "Yeah, you should have *seen* her! Bya-chan was hot, yeah. More cleavage than I've ever seen her show. Are you jealous?"

"You've *worn* clothes like these?!" he demanded, turning back to her.

She was by now, of course, a brilliant shade of red. "I-It was for a-a mission...!"

"Neji's jealous, Neji's jealous!" Deidara sang, laughing.

"Why would *I* be jealous? You've only seen her in a kimono and her normal jackets. That's hardly —"

"*And* I've seen her naked, yeah," the blonde said smugly.

"Again, why do I care? If I ever had the urge, I have the Byakugan, you idiot—"

This, of course, resulted in both men being slapped and Hinata clinging to Sasori for the rest of the day.

Another episode included Hinata and Sukeru walking in on Takamaru when he was cooking, early in the morning. Unfortunately, the man was only wearing an apron—that was obviously his assistant's—and boxers. Both women went scarlet and again hid behind Sasori for the rest of the day.

Aside from all of the unwanted female attention, Sasori already had his hands full. Takamaru was constantly pestering him to know what kind of jutsu he specialized in, and Deidara was usually too busy to distract the other with. This meant that Sasori typically would snag Sukeru and push her into Takamaru's chest while he fled the scene. Normally she would be flirty and embarrassed enough to distract him for the next half hour, at least.

"Have you noticed those two...?" Sasori whispered to Deidara one day. The blonde looked up from his bowl of noodles, following his partner's gaze to where Takamaru was discussing battle plans with Neji and Sukeru was looking dreamily on.

"What about them, yeah?" he asked around a mouthful of food. He paused to swallow, and then, "Look pretty normal to me..."

"Aside from the fact that they are the most abnormal two shinobi I have ever met," Sasori deadpanned, "Takamaru is always talking about Shinjiro and the fight plan. Sukeru is always just watching Takamaru. And those *outfits* she wears..."

"I think they're interesting, yeah." Sasori then decided that he had better give up trying to discuss these types of things with Deidara, and reached back to push Deidara's head forward into his bowl of noodles.

"If you think they're so interesting, Deidara, why don't *you* wear them?"

"You'd like it too much, Sasori-danna," he replied around the noodles.

Odd incidents notwithstanding, the days passed.

--.-

"I was right." the hawk grumbled from its perch, ruffling its feathers.

"Hmm? And what were you right about?" the man sitting at his desk asked in reply. He swiveled around in his chair, messing with a pair of goggles in his hands. "Do tell."

"Those four you saw earlier. They were going to see Takamaru. They've been there for awhile now."

The man froze. His hands held the goggles away from his face, though the strap was already tightened around the back of his head. His hazel eyes widened slightly, and with a *thwack*, he accidentally let go of the goggles and they proceeded to smack him in the face. The hawk sighed, covering its head with a wing to hide itself from the embarrassment of knowing its own master.

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?!" he demanded, bolting upright. His eyes were watering slightly now, but he just pushed his goggles off onto his forehead and rubbed at them irritably. "Goddamn it..."

"And are you cursing this knowledge or your own clumsiness." the hawk couldn't resist asking, still hiding behind a russet wing. He didn't reply, and was instead shuffled around his workroom, muttering to himself and pacing. The pair of goggles were still pushed lopsidedly onto his forehead, reflecting the candlelight in certain poses. The hawk raised its head long enough to glance over its wing, but caught the reflection at the right time, and ducked back down with an angry hiss. "Shinjiro."

"Sama! *Sama!* Can't any of you obstinate, overgrown bobolinks call me by the rightful title just *once?*" Shinjiro shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

The hawk, which was at least twice his height, cowered sullenly and peeked out from underneath its flight feathers. "No."

"Fine," and he slumped down at his desk with a defeated sigh. Shinjiro ran a hand through his platinum blonde hair, rolling his head to one side. "That's... not good, either way. Takamaru's probably planning something, then... An attack. It would have to be some time soon, since he wouldn't risk keeping them around long enough for me to find out. And he's only had them... six days now. It'll be soon..."

"What are you going to do."

"Kill him, finally. He knows he can't catch me, and even if any of the others have flight capabilities, I know I can always fly *higher*. Takamaru's weighed down with those reckless wings of his, and even if it's another hawk summoner, you're faster than all of your brothers and sisters."

"It's been awhile since we've tested that." the hawk mumbled, clicking its beak. "But more or less, yes."

"I'll win. And on my own, too."

"What about ground forces."

"What can *they* do? Throw rocks at me?"

"..."

"Just relax, taka-teme."

Feathers were soon ruffled, and the hawk raised its head and fixed a golden eye on its master. "I don't like it when you call me that, Shinjiro."

"I'll stop calling you that if you stop leaving off the '-sama'," Shinjiro replied calmly, putting his feet up on his desk. Already he'd composed himself completely again, and was fiddling with the goggles once more. "Hmm... how about tomorrow we pay Takamaru a visit? Let's see if we can attack him before he can attack us."

-.-.-

The day of the assault dawned crisply. Hinata, personally, hadn't slept a wink. She rolled over, trying to ignore all of the old, clay statues staring at her.

Something... didn't feel right. Why did Sasori just accept Takamaru so easily? And why was Sukeru so easily forgiven? Sasori knew something she didn't, and being the ass that he was, wasn't sharing that information. It was driving her up the wall. Deidara, too, was acting weird... but she could chalk that up to reconnecting with Takamaru.

Sukeru was just completely off. She was panicking and desperate when they'd first met, and now she was perfectly happy. Oblivious, even. All she could do was stare at Takamaru and point out the mistakes in his slowly-forming battle plan. It seemed to be a cute little partnership they had going; he'd rush in, and she'd carefully restrain him. But something was still just off. She held none of the urgency and fear she'd had when she had first confronted Hinata. Then, Sukeru had been wild, but *protective* at the same time. She wouldn't let any of them harm a hair on Takamaru's head.

But now...

That just didn't add up. Why would they kill Takamaru, anyway? Why was she so worried about that? They had coexisted peacefully until then... well, Sasori had been practically murderous, but he'd calmed down after a talk with Deidara. Had he shared something? Deidara *had* seemed pretty eager to get going with Takamaru, now that she thought about it...

"Ugh," she groaned as she sat up, rubbing her eyes. She wouldn't get any sleep. At least she was used to it... Hinata got out of bed as quietly as she could, tiptoeing out past Neji, who was asleep soundly on the floor near the door. She smiled at the way he looked so serious, even in slumber.

Out in the hall, though, her smile faded. Hinata aimlessly wandered in the direction of the kitchen; she could cook everyone an early breakfast, or eat something herself...

Something wasn't right. Something didn't fit. Or something was missing. She wasn't sure which. Deidara knew Takamaru. Sukeru knew both Takamaru and Sasori. Sukeru was willing to betray Sasori to protect Takamaru—from what?—but now she seemed as docile as a lamb. However... Hinata now remembered one particular moment when Sasori had jokingly mentioned killing Takamaru, and Sukeru looked like she would have gone for his throat.

So why did she suddenly drop the initial angry act?

The Hyuuga girl made it to the kitchen sooner than she would have liked. She frowned at this. And instead of actually cooking something, she just decided to get herself a bowl of ice cream. Hopefully Takamaru wouldn't mind.

"Why..." she murmured, dishing the desert into a bowl, sticking the spoon in her mouth as she thought. Hinata carried her treat back to the table after putting the rest away, scooting out the chair with more noise than she would have liked. With any luck that hadn't woken anyone else.

Hinata continued to ponder, her ice cream mostly melting in the bowl, untouched. She only looked up when someone else entered the room.

"Oh! Hinata-san, I'm sorry..." Sukeru apologized, bowing her head slightly. Her long, black hair was undone and hanging down around her face, partially concealing her eyes. Hinata didn't like that look; it was too shifty. Too easy to hide things. Of course, she was already slightly paranoid from all of these thoughts and lack of sleep, so that might just have been her.

"No problem. I was just eating some ice cream... I'm sorry if I wasn't allowed to." She apologized as well, though only halfheartedly. She was too deep in thought to mind much at this point. Sukeru's behavior in general was odd. She didn't seem to hold any leftover hostility towards Hinata, and was even friendly. Shinobi just didn't *do* that without reason. Which meant there was

either an ulterior motive or some outside force. *Sasori had talked to her afterward...*

"So... couldn't you sleep either?" Sukeru asked conversationally, sitting down at the table. Hinata blinked; she had somehow acquired a cup of ramen. Had she been zoned out that long?

She shook her head, her own dark hair falling around her shoulders as she did so. "Too... nervous, I suppose. You?"

"Probably the same," Sukeru replied with a smile eerily reminiscent of Takamaru's. Hinata felt an involuntary shiver run down her spine, and she looked away with an uncertain smile. "But... I guess that attack's today, huh? I suppose Takamaru has planned out more for this one than any other fight before in his life, so I can't complain much..."

"You really worry about him, don't you?" Hinata asked, cocking her head to one side. As an afterthought she took another bite of her half melted ice cream, so it didn't all go to waste.

The Iwa chuunin smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "I think it's obvious to everyone except him. Takamaru just rushes into everything without thinking, and doesn't notice anyone but Shinjiro... But I suppose that Deidara-san has changed that for him. I've never seen him act so... happy."

"Yeah..." Hinata also reflected upon the relationship the two seemed to share. Already they'd had so many inside jokes that only they would laugh about, while the rest of the company in their presence would stare blankly ahead while wondering what was so funny. Takamaru knew *just* where Deidara was ticklish, or what faces to make to evoke just the right kind of reaction from him. It was rather childish, but endearing. They acted like a couple of kids, but kids who had been best friends since the first year of the academy. "Yeah, I suppose they do... Kind of makes you feel alone in their presence."

"Exactly," Sukeru smiled from behind a mouthful of noodles, this time the grin crinkling her eyes. "You can't help but feel left out. But the world's always like that, isn't it? If it isn't Shinjiro, it's Deidara-san."

"And if it isn't Takamaru-san, then it's Sasori." Hinata was suddenly very thankful that she still at least had Neji. She would feel desperately lonely without his companionship, even if he was insufferable sometimes (such as when he felt the need to continuously compete with Deidara). "I wonder if there are, in the whole world, just any two people who are just right for each other and can see no one but the other."

"That's a silly thing to wonder about." Sukeru giggled. She finished her ramen with a slurp, taking both her cup and Hinata's bowl over to the sink to wash. "Why not wonder about something different, like who you're going to marry?"

Hinata flushed and nervously twisted the ring on her finger. "I-I'd much rather wonder about shinobi things for now."

"So not all kunoichi at the same..." the black-haired woman said thoughtfully, sitting herself on the table. "I don't really like being a ninja, you know that? Too much fighting, strife, the like. Takamaru, though, he *thrives* on it." She smiled lazily, drawing patterns on the tabletop.

"I know the feeling," Hinata replied with a rue grin. It was one thing Neji and Deidara—even Sasori—had in common. Still, Sukeru had seemed rather gung-ho about it when she'd wanted to kill Hinata... "Er, Sukeru... san... I'm sorry for fighting with you the other day. I guess it was just a big misunderstanding...?"

"Hmm?" Sukeru raised both eyebrows expectantly, still smiling languidly. "What do you mean, Hinata-san?"

Hinata blinked her white eyes, and then looked down at the table where Sukeru was still tracing the same design. She sighed. You just couldn't connect with some people. "Nevermind..."

"Oh, alright..." she giggled again, rolling her eyes. Hinata didn't catch that; she was too busy watching the older woman draw patterns on the tabletop. It was a circle, but then a slash through it... and another... and a third...

"S-Sukeru-san, what are you drawing?" Hinata tried to keep her voice from shaking. Suddenly, things made so much sense it hurt.

"This design that Takamaru has on his necklace under his shirt. It supposedly means something, but he won't tell me. I just know that it's on a little pendant, below the one he wears above his shirt. I always thought it was weird, how he can wear two necklaces constantly, but I think it's kind of cute."

Hinata nodded, tearing her eyes away from the symbol, back to her own hands.

The only information they had about the mission was that the target was a Jashinist, and a picture that *Sukeru* had given them. She had only shown Deidara. Sasori had figured it out before any of them, then. And that was why Sukeru had flipped out when she found out that Takamaru hadn't killed them. Sasori had done something to her to stop her from worrying... or telling... or something.

But the fact remained. Takamaru was their target, and neither he nor Sukeru knew about it.

So why were they helping him kill this Shinjiro...?

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Takamaru vs. Shinjiro! With a few twists...

When Birds Attack

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Activity seemed to be the main importance. If you seemed busy, you were okay. Otherwise, you would either become busy soon, or you were thinking too much. Deidara was okay with this, though. If he couldn't think, then he couldn't *think*. He had one day left before Sasori's deadline and he had to spend most of it *fighting*, of all things. Maybe he could bribe the little redhead with a kiss or something for more time.

"Uhh, guys? We have a bit of a problem, yeah..." Deidara called as he opened his clay pouches.

"No clay, right?" Sasori peeked in from the hallway, expression neutral. Evidently he'd been expecting it. Or had actually remembered how much clay his partner had already wasted in petty things.

"No, I'm fine—Takamaru, where's the nearest river?" There was no way he was letting Sasori know that he barely had any clay. Enough for two, maybe three birds tops. You couldn't exactly go to war with three small birds.

"Too far away. Why? You out of clay?" Takamaru promptly elbowed Sasori aside to stand in the doorway. He was in the middle of switching outfits, apparently, and pulled a long-sleeved shirt (something Deidara had never seen him in before) over his head before turning back to the blonde. Unfortunately, he had somehow lost his pants during this change and seemed quite unaware of this.

"You just go get some pants on," Sasori said, shoving him back out into the hallway rather roughly. Deidara made a mental note to thank him later; no telling what Neji would do if the man walked by Hinata in just his boxers again. The redhead then walked into the room, closing the door behind him. Deidara took down his mental note, not liking this development. He didn't need distractions now—he needed clay! "Deidara—"

"I don't want to hear it, yeah, I can't hear you!" He clamped both hands over his ears, dropping his nearly empty bag of clay in the process. For good measure, he closed both eyes, even if one of them was hidden behind his scope. "I don't want to hear this right now, Sasori-danna. Just get out of my room and let me panic on my own. I don't want to have to deal with your latent hormones, yeah."

Sasori didn't reply (or maybe Deidara actually *couldn't* hear with his hands over his ears) for a long time, so Deidara hesitantly reopened his eyes and dropped his arms. His partner was looking at him with a rather blank expression, something he had learned to recognize as a warning sign in him. "I was merely going to tell you that Hinata knows about Takamaru. If you are going to get paranoid every time I come into the room from now on, maybe it *would* be a better idea if we switched partners."

Oh no, not this again. Deidara straightened and plastered his best glare onto his face. But that soon disappeared; nothing could withstand Sasori's politely blank face for long. The blonde artist sighed, ran a hand through his hair (which he needed to tie back before getting into this fight), and then gave up. "Okay, yeah. I didn't mean it that way. I just meant... I don't want to have to think about stuff like *that* during this fight, worry about you *and* Bya-chan... and... ugh, just nevermind."

"You've said so yourself; I'm the stronger fighter of the two of us. Why worry?" Sasori asked softly, tilting his head to one side. Deidara swore to himself, and looked away. So now he had the audacity to pull the young act on him? Moreover, he was *baiting* him...

"Sasori-*chan*, you need to shut up and leave me alone before I have to break that pretty little face of yours, yeah," Deidara replied maliciously, grinning forcefully behind his bangs.

"...'-chan'—?"

"If you're going to act like a horrible little brat to me, then I'm going to treat you like one. You only *look* like a kid, Sasori-danna, yeah. Don't try to act like it. Acting like the old geezer suits you better, yeah."

Sasori had him pinned up against the wall before the last 'yeah'. "I'm glad to see you've gotten your audacity back, Deidara," he said with an evil glint in his eye, "but may I remind you that I am *not* one to screw with? Particularly on a mission."

"But it's my hobby."

Sasori dropped him, sighing and running a hand through his hair. He shook his head, shaking out his hair a bit, but only succeeded in messing it up further. Deidara smiled to himself and reached over to smooth it out, using his fingers as a comb. Sasori averted his cinnamon eyes, frowning. "You're treating me like a child again."

"If you look like one, I can't help it."

"Maternal instincts?"

"Nice try, yeah." Deidara was less than amused at that particular remark. To show this, he 'combed' out a snarl in the red hair with nothing more than a yank. Sasori didn't flinch in the least, though he allowed his head to get jerked to one side from the force of the pull. The Iwa-nin remembered too late about his non-existent nerve endings and lamented their death.

"You're going to have to kill him today," Sasori said lowly, eyes still glued to the far wall.

"Nope. Tomorrow. You said a week."

"A week from that day."

"No, a week starting the next day, yeah." Okay, so he was pushing it. But if Sasori was going to be difficult, he was too. Who cared if he was killing his chances for an extension? If it came down to it, Deidara would quite simply refuse to kill Takamaru if it wasn't the proper time. (When would the proper time be? He had no idea.) And if Sasori went for him, he'd get between them, and—
whoa. Deidara swallowed thickly, fingers pausing in Sasori's hair. Where had that thought come from?

Sasori, taking advantage of the pause, ducked out from under his grasp and stepped back towards the door. "Tomorrow, then. You're going to kill him then." He said this with a coolly distant voice, focusing on one of the clouds on his uniform instead of his face.

Deidara nodded, unable to trust his voice. Why had he just thought that...? Would he *really* fight Sasori in defense of Takamaru? Would he really betray the Akatsuki—no, Sasori himself—to preserve a half-dead memory? Would he do just as the puppeteer said, betray them for his pre-Akatsuki life...?

-.-.-

Sasori left Deidara, pleased to see that when he came back out into the hallway, Takamaru was wearing pants. True, Neji was just short of spitting fire at him, but whatever worked. If it scarred a Hyuuga or two, he wouldn't lose sleep over it. Sasori edged past the growing glaring contest, keeping his eyes on the floor to prevent getting drawn in.

Was he losing Deidara? If he was being honest with himself, he never *had* him to begin with, but Sasori never sweated the details like that. If it was a strategy or of dire importance to a mission, he could do that. Cut and dried details. Human interaction? Might as well tell Kisame to eat tofu. Sasori slumped down onto the couch, nearly missing, but managing somehow to get his feet off the floor regardless. *Was he losing Deidara?*

Deidara was too attached to everything. Be it Hinata, or this newcomer, he dove headfirst into his commitment. Sasori dearly hoped that the same rules applied to him, but one can only hope in such situations. If the blonde was that skittish around him, to resort to ignoring him with such childish behaviors, then he wouldn't push him. Sasori didn't want to alienate him anymore than he already was. Because if Deidara defected from the Akatsuki... Sasori would go as well, and it would rip apart the organization as the other members picked sides. Sasori knew for a fact that Kakuzu would choose Sasori over Pein any day, unless bribed with a sufficient sum. Hidan couldn't even be *called* loyal to the leader, so that was already nearly half the organization. No telling who else would choose their side.

Their side? What am I talking about? he asked himself harshly, propping himself up by the elbows. The redhead stared listlessly off of the couch's arm, towards a corner of the room. It was darkened slightly with dust, proving how little the Iwa-nin living here cleaned. *It's Deidara's stupidity versus the Akatsuki. I shouldn't even be wondering about which side I'd take...*

But the fact remained.

Sasori felt threatened. Something he was entirely unused to, and even so, usually when he felt exposed, he quickly killed whatever made him feel so. Maybe it would be easier to just kill Deidara and get it over with. Kakuzu had been through quite a few partners by now, so surely the leader would accept him killing his first. Okay, *second* partner, but Orochimaru hadn't been killed by Sasori's own hands...

Kakuzu and I are getting too similar in our habits, Sasori mentally groaned. Though he knew it wasn't true. Kakuzu killed partners from frustration, anger, or mere irritation. Sasori got rid of partners because he became too attached and felt betrayed when they, well, betrayed the group—and him. The puppet master huffed, crossing his arms underneath his chin. *I'm getting too old for this sort of thing.*

He'd just have to try his damned hardest to keep Deidara within his grasp. And if things went awry, then oh well. He could always get a new partner and finally learn to properly ignore them.

-.-.-

Hinata started to sweat when she heard that Deidara had run out of his medium of choice. Of course, knowing Takamaru would die soon (and more likely than not, Sukeru as well) and having to keep it a secret already set her on edge, but that was beside the point. At least some of her fears abated when Takamaru revealed that he had stores of clay that Deidara used to use years ago. It was old, but not entirely dried out, and after only an hour longer than what they should have taken, Deidara proclaimed his clay combat-ready. (Apparently it took awhile to infuse the proper amounts of chakra into the aged mud. Either that or he was stalling.)

"So umm..." Hinata tried starting a conversation, but only got those two sounds out before the tension from the group stifled her. You could basically cut it with a kunai. Something was going on between Sasori and Deidara again, she could tell. Neji was still glaring daggers at Takamaru for walking around only half dressed as well. And then there was the collective cloud hanging over them at the thought of Takamaru's true fate. She felt smothered.

Sukeru and Takamaru both seemed completely oblivious to all of this. Of course.

The six of them headed out from Takamaru's mountain with a brisk pace. And it was only after she lost sight of their temporary home that she realized what they had gotten into.

First off, flight capabilities posed a bit of a problem. True, she could form a clay bird... but it had been months since she had attempted such a thing. Mostly she had been training her *Juuken* style with Neji and trying to expand her sight range with the Byakugan. She probably wouldn't get airborne in this fight. Which meant that there was little she—or Neji or Sukeru—could do.

And even if there was... Shinjiro was equal to Takamaru in strength, she supposed. Maybe a bit more skilled. And definitely having more allies. But that meant... Takamaru was equal in strength with Deidara, possibly even Sasori, so they were fighting Akatsuki-level foes. Neji and Sukeru were probably up to par, but Hinata felt hopelessly lost at the mere thought of such a fight. At least she had long-range genjutsu if all else failed...

They didn't take the goats, because Takamaru feared for their safety. Understandable, of course, considering the last time he'd loaned them out Aya had almost gone over the edge with them. But it made the pace more and more dangerous as they continued on. Hinata had almost fallen twice and Neji once. She was about to comment upon this when the ground beneath them shifted. She realized, just as time seemed to freeze, that it was the landslide jutsu again. Hinata looked up and saw a silhouette on top of the ridge above them, back lighted so she couldn't make out who it was.

Then, the stone beneath them turned to what felt like water, and all six of them fell.

The landslide carried them over the edge of the canyon again. Only this time, they hadn't had the goats' (or Neji's) warning, and *all* of them were caught in it. It seemed stronger, too. Probably more chakra invested in the attack this time. Hinata had to actually duck back into the moving rock to avoid one of the larger stones, but when she tried getting back out, she found it more difficult to do.

She activated her Byakugan just to try to keep an eye on things. Luckily it was a long way down, so they had plenty of time to get out and away from the falling rocks. Unluckily, they were already caught in it, and it wasn't as simple as just kicking out this time.

Hinata spotted Takamaru, purely for the reason that he appeared to be glowing white in her Byakugan's vision. He appeared to have covered himself with a thin layer of chakra, probably to try to keep himself from getting crushed. Then, as she watched, two pure white wings burst from his shoulder blades, and he barely had enough momentum to get free of the landslide. His chakra was already exhausted by those two simple moves, probably because of the speed at which he'd had to execute them.

Before she could react, Hinata felt two strong arms grab her by the shoulders. Though he was mostly in her blind spot, she knew it was Neji, though how he had managed to swim through the moving rock was beyond her. "Kick out!" he shouted near her ear over the roar of the landslide. It seemed like a repeat of last time, only thank the gods this time she didn't have a mountain goat to worry about.

Hinata just nodded, as well as she could, and tried to move herself so she wasn't upside-down. Easier said than done. As she was repositioning herself, trying to get purchase on the stone, she saw Takamaru swoop back into the landslide. He weaved in and out of the larger rocks—they had been falling long enough to separate themselves from most of the smaller, looser gravel—and then popped back out into the cleaner air with Sukeru bridal-style in his arms.

She felt herself pulled out, away from the canyon wall, by the arms around her waist. Hinata added her own kick to it, and finally both she and Neji fell out into the free air. Of course, they were still falling, but this was just without the threat of falling rocks crushing them. This cleared her head slightly, just as she realized that she hadn't been able to pinpoint Deidara yet.

She only spotted him when they passed him. He was anchored to the other side of the canyon by the flats of his sandals, though how he got to that side was a mystery. The answer became apparent, however, when below them, a relatively large clay owl burst out of the landslide, an irate redhead perched on its back. With the Byakugan, Hinata saw the way Deidara's face broke into a relieved grin as he spotted his partner was free of the rocks.

The owl caught both her and Neji as well on its way up, floating upward languidly until it was hovering near its creator's head. "Going up, yeah?" Deidara asked with a smile, stepping onto the bird's head. It dipped slightly under his weight, but continued fluttering upward nonetheless.

She saw Takamaru deposit Sukeru on the edge of the canyon, shaking out his chakra wings as he landed. The owl perched beside them, easily taller than even the silver-haired Iwa-nin. It rotated its head, watching as its passengers disembarked rather shakily. Hinata doubted she was the only one distrustful of the rock beneath their sandals at this point.

"Don't worry, that jutsu takes up a lot of chakra. He's not going to use it again," Sukeru said with a bright smile.

"Yeah, but that's not the only thing that takes up a lot of chakra..." Takamaru added wearily. He was already obviously strained just from having to speed-create his wings and armor. Some of it was already flaking off, though from the fact that he didn't want to maintain it or from the force of the rocks was up in the air. "That bastard, it wasn't even Shinjiro..."

"What?" Neji said sharply, turning from dusting himself off.

"I told you, Shinjiro is a lonely man. He likes to gather missing Iwa-nin to him for support, like a miniature army. That was his right-hand man, oh, what's his name..." Takamaru halted the sentence when he figured out he didn't know the man's name.

"Asoka?" Sukeru tried helpfully, sidling up to him.

"Oh, yeah! That's it. Thanks, Sukeru," he grinned at her, winking.

"Speaking of thanks, I never got to thank you for earlier..." she said with a coy smile, running her hand up his arm onto his shoulder. Hinata felt herself go red and looked away, hastily shutting off her Byakugan. Typical Sukeru, doing things like this even in the midst of a battle...

Speaking of battle. "So where is he now?" she asked, breaking up what could have developed into something highly inappropriate for the situation. Sukeru shot her a dirty look for her effort.

And as if prompted by her query, two things happened simultaneously.

The first was that a *huge* hawk dropped down out of the sky in a sheer dive. It caught the clay owl's head in its claws on the way down, absolutely shredding its head. The ninja only had time for a step and a duck before it exploded. Luckily, it only appeared to be a C2, and the closest two had been Takamaru (who had his armor) and Sasori (who wouldn't have felt it anyway). Takamaru ducked and rolled off of the cliff face, spreading his wings to catch him as he did so.

The second had actually been happening that whole time, but they only realized it then. Two shinobi, both camouflaged (or coated) with rock, were both stepping out of the side of the path. Sukeru reacted on instinct alone and nearly decapitated one with high kick, but the man was not to be deterred. Hinata was already making hand signs for a genjutsu to pull them both out of the rock face, but for looking like they were made of stone, they were rather fast. Apparently they had just come out to break up the group, not for an actual attack.

So one of them grabbed Neji in a headlock and had him halfway back into the rock before Hinata was done with the second sign. She gave a startled scream and jumped forward, Byakugan reactivating from the sheer adrenaline rush. The seal on her forehead gave a slight twinge from the surge of chakra, but she ignored it, and was trying to pull Neji back out of the stone by one foot. Unfortunately, the rest of his body that had been protruding from the cliff face promptly turned to stone, and then crumbled in her hands.

Hinata stumbled backwards, horrified. With her Byakugan, she saw the second shinobi had made the mistake of going for Sasori, probably disarmed by his young appearance. He almost had him into the rock, too, before Deidara jumped into the role of guard dog and shoved a clay spider into the stone shinobi's face. Sasori, caught off guard from the sudden release, lurched forward—right over the edge of the cliff. Having a meter-wide path probably wasn't the best idea for a battlefield.

Deidara had a double-winged hummingbird down to catch his partner before Hinata even got back to her feet. Sukeru, likewise, was already bounding back into action. She made a string of seals fast enough that even Hinata's eyes couldn't catch them, and then slammed both hands into the rock. It shuddered beneath her, and Hinata looked upward to where the silhouette had been before. The silhouette was back, holding a familiar profile in a headlock. Whatever jutsu the black-haired woman had used, however, knocked them both off balance and threw the pair of them off into the empty space beside the canyon wall.

-.-.-

Neji found himself falling for the second time in less than ten minutes. He could tell that this wouldn't be the last time, either, and made a note to figure out a way to easily stop himself from doing so. From now on, he was making sure his feet were glued to whatever was beneath him with as much chakra as he could spare.

He just saw a blur of color as he passed the others. Well, almost. Before he had even really properly passed said blur, something slammed into his chest, and he found himself and whoever his new assailant was stuck to the opposite side of the canyon. Neji blinked to clear his head, and found Hinata clinging to him with a grip that was a bit too tight to be completely normal.

"You—D-Don't you ever scare me like that again," she said, panting slightly. The brunette just nodded. Both the force of her tackle—which was ingenious, but painful nonetheless—and her arms around him now were making him slightly short of breath.

After a few moments too long for it to be completely casual, Hinata let him go, making sure he was steadily horizontal on the rock. She even dusted off his shirt and hair for him. Neji smirked, patting her on the head. "Were you really that worried?"

"Y-You turned to stone. And then... fell. Again," she replied sullenly.

"I can take care of myself. It's you I'm worried about."

"I'm better suited for this fight than *you* are, niisan," Hinata replied defiantly, finally meeting his gaze.

"Not that this isn't heartwarming, but you can do this later, can't you?" Neji looked up—well, as he was currently standing horizontally on a wall, he was really just looking across the gap—to see Sasori straddling a hummingbird, arms crossed. He didn't look pleased at being caught flying again.

"Deidara confine you to your bird?" Neji asked, tilting his head to one side.

Sasori scowled at him. "Yes, and damn him, it's actually for a good reason. I can't stick to walls like you two can, so they'll just continually throw me off and distract him from helping Takamaru. I've been grounded, figuratively speaking."

"You're a puppet user. Can't you control a doll of a different medium?" Neji asked, grinning slyly. Sasori looked at him, slowly uncrossing his arms. It looked like they just got another ninja on their side who could fly.

-.-.-

Speaking of flying ninjas, Takamaru wasn't exactly faring the best. Talons the size of his forearm did that. If he hadn't used a *Bunshin* to make a quick shield, he would have been ribbons by now. And even so, he was gushing blood from several gashes and was barely staying airborne. At least his wings couldn't be broken by something so simple as claws. He was rapidly figuring that out, and at the risk of falling each time, he was now using his wings as a shield from the talons and the massive beak.

"Hold still, will you." the hawk grumbled, flapping its wings rapidly to keep itself hovering.

"I don't think I will, songbird," Takamaru replied, ducking under a swipe that would have otherwise decapitated him. "Tell me where Shinjiro is and I won't clip your flight feathers."

"How should I know." the bird replied snappishly. It gave up on trying to gouge him, and instead set about beating him with its wings. And while they were large and powerful enough to probably snap his bones, it didn't matter whether or not they touched him. Because just hitting his wings was enough to knock him off balance, and it took quite awhile to correct himself before crashing. And Takamaru quickly found out that even if the wings *didn't* hit him, the downdraft they created had mostly the same effect.

The hawk was a summon, and a large one at that. Takamaru knew that size mattered with summons; the larger, the higher up in the hierarchy and skill. He was fighting someone who was probably at least as strong as Shinjiro, if not stronger. And even if the hawk couldn't use an ounce of ninjutsu, it was already literally beating Takamaru with just virtually serrated talons, a great curved beak, and two wings.

He noticed that the bird was slowly forcing him downward as well. Unfortunately, he noticed this too late.

Takamaru finally found Shinjiro, at least.

He was perched on top of one of the great stone spires on the far side of the canyon, bow already drawn and arrow notched. Takamaru spotted him at the last moment, and only turned so that the arrow didn't pierce his heart. As it was, he was fairly certain it punctured a lung, and it didn't even have the courtesy of going all the way through. As he grunted and looked down (something he'd regret later) to notice that Shinjiro had purposely used overly large stabilizing feathers in the tail to stop it from doing so, he noticed the rope that was attached to it. Takamaru was then struck with a wing and temporarily knocked senseless.

Shinjiro, who was connected to the other end of the rope, just watched dispassionately as Takamaru dropped like a stone. The heavy chakra wings of his were definitely a liability now. As he felt the first tug on the rope, Shinjiro held it strong. He motioned his hawk over to pick him up, and fastened the line to the bird's ankle. The hawk didn't seem pleased with this, but didn't say anything.

The cord snapped taut and Takamaru was now suspended over Iwa's deepest canyon by nothing but an arrow through his chest. "Ooh, I like this. This is the easiest fight we've ever had. Are his new kids that much of a liability to him?" Shinjiro asked eagerly. His hawk just made a noncommittal click of the beak, looking away.

"Hey!" Shinjiro looked up, blinking behind his tinted goggles. There was no one there. But then, as he stared, he saw a shape directly in front of the sun. It was getting larger. Which meant—it was coming closer! The hawk ducked instinctively as two large talons shot into the space where its eyes had just been. The sudden movement made Takamaru dangle below, and the hawk, unused to the sudden, moving weight, was temporarily jerked to the side as it tried to compensate. "Let go of Takamaru, yeah."

Shinjiro recognized the blonde as the one from before. Unfortunately, his guess had been wrong; this guy was definitely male. Oh well. He fought too many kunoichi as it was, what with Sukeru constantly with Takamaru. "And if I don't?"

"Then this explodes, yeah." The blonde grinned maliciously, and Shinjiro realized that either he picked the habit up from Takamaru, or vice versa. Regardless, it was definitely the same I'm-going-to-kill-you-soon grin.

"And you're the one sitting on the bomb, smartass," Shinjiro pointed out flatly. "Nothing can outmaneuver my hawk, anyway. We'd get away before you could even detonate."

"You think I'd waste a good bird?" The blonde had the audacity to laugh. He then leaned forward on his bird, still grinning crazily. "Hi, my name is Deidara, yeah. And the guy sitting behind you, he's Karura. You better learn the difference. Inhale deeply, yeah!"

On cue, Shinjiro felt a sudden weight on the hawk's back, and turned back to see an exact clone of the blonde—Deidara. Only this one wasn't grinning. This one was glaring at him like he wanted to

rip his throat out with his bare hands. Shinjiro wasn't stupid, either. He knew that he couldn't outrun a bomb that was *right there*, and that his hawk was slowed down enough as it was with the extra weight. Luckily, one of those extra weights was going to save his skin.

The hawk dived down into an absolute drop at his nudge, and swerved upward just in time to catch Takamaru. Shinjiro made sure that the arrow was still secure in him before putting him in a headlock, though it was hardly necessary. "Karura, Deidara, this is Takamaru. I believe you know each other. Want to see if he and I bleed the same color? Then go ahead, detonate your little bomb."

Deidara glowered at him, hand already in the detonation seal. He slowly lowered it, gaze shifting between Takamaru and Karura. Shinjiro knew that if he really was Akatsuki like his uniform said he was, he'd better be careful. *Very* careful. He still had a bomb sitting behind him and if Takamaru suddenly lost value, he would undoubtedly die. At least he'd take Takamaru with him.

"That's what I thought," Shinjiro couldn't resist saying. He beamed at the blonde on his off-white bird, and tried to clear his head. They were both stuck in a hard place, but if he just kept hold of Takamaru, it'd at least buy him some time. Luckily they were the only ones who could fly, so as long as they stayed airborne, they wouldn't be interrupted.

Shinjiro had made a mistake, though. He had counted Takamaru out.

The next thing he knew, he felt a sharp pain just below his collarbone, and looked down just to hit his chin on something. After tilting his head to one side and then looking down, Shinjiro found Takamaru grinning viciously up at him. His hands were still stuck and he had him in a headlock—and then Shinjiro remembered the wings. Which had shifted as to impale him with one of the long, sword-shaped flight feathers. It snapped off on Takamaru's command, and Shinjiro reeled backward as he tried to get rid of it. It wasn't fatal, but the blood loss would start to impair his judgment soon if he didn't stop it. He then realized that he might as well leave the chakra feather in him; it would stop the bleeding as well as a bandage, and he wouldn't have to do anything for it. A shinobi's simplicity.

Takamaru had ducked out of his grip, spreading his wings as he jumped off of the surprised hawk. Shinjiro, only thinking of getting away from Karura, jumped after him. As Takamaru caught the wind underneath his wings and was lifted, Shinjiro, on his way down, grabbed his ankles and held on for all he was worth. The feather still stuck in his shoulder made this difficult, but at least he wasn't the only one having problems. Takamaru already had heavier-than-average wings that were built for gliding mostly, and he couldn't counterweigh him.

"Let go, damn it—!" Takamaru growled as his rising momentum finally faltered. There was a moment in which both men simply hung in the air, but gravity soon took even that away from them. Shinjiro looked up as they started their descent, and was overjoyed to see that the hawk had bucked Karura off, and the doppelganger of the blonde was already below them in his fall.

Shinjiro followed Karura's path downward, pleased to see that he finally got rid of one of the bigger, immediate threats. Unfortunately, it landed on top of the mountain where he had positioned Asoka and Yuu. He got a reminder of just what reflexes did for a shinobi. Both men jumped out of the way when they felt the vibrations underfoot from Karura's fall (which didn't seem to harm him, damn it) and jumped away. Unfortunately, Karura lashed out and grabbed onto the nearest thing—Yuu. Asoka melted into the stone below him just as Karura *finally* wiped the glare off of his face. Unfortunately, it was replaced with a grin that would have put Takamaru at his bloodiest to shame. The bomb detonated—into nothing.

Shinjiro shouted a curse towards Deidara; it had been a dud bomb. But just as he was going to start

throwing a fit about it, a horrified Yuu *disintegrated* before his eyes.

"Shit," Takamaru said above him, but it was mostly lost in the wind. Apparently he had been watching as well. His wings were both completely extended, slowing their fall, but they were still both in trouble if something didn't happen soon.

Luckily for Shinjiro, something did happen. His hawk had caught onto the fact that its master was falling to his demise, and swooped down in a dive that only birds of prey could properly pull off. This had mixed effects on their fall. As the bird righted itself in midair with a sharp flap of its wings, the downdraft sent both Takamaru and Shinjiro careening off sideways, smashing into the nearest canyon wall. They both bounced off, but somehow Shinjiro maintained his grasp on Takamaru's ankles.

The hawk then caught its master in careful talons (which only scratched him slightly), but again, was unused to Takamaru's swinging weight. Shinjiro had waited a moment too long to let go, and as a result, the hawk suddenly pulling him up made Takamaru flip around and nearly pulled both of Shinjiro's shoulders out of their sockets. He was now hanging upside down by his feet, and Shinjiro was left in a painfully awkward position in his own hawk's claws.

As the trio rose back into the air for a safer altitude, they drew level with Deidara. He hadn't moved on his bird. He didn't appear pleased, though, and when they got closer, he shouted down to them, "You destroyed my Karura."

"Oh, no," Takamaru mumbled below them. He may not have, though. It was hard to tell.

"Who gave you the right to destroy my Karura, yeah?!" Deidara demanded angrily.

"Did it look like *I* destroyed him? He just landed and took out Yuu!" Shinjiro snapped back, waving a fist in Deidara's general direction. It was a bit undignified to hold an argument in the talons of an oversized hawk, though.

No sense could be talked into him, however. "You killed my art. It doesn't *work* that way, Shinjiro. My art kills you, yeah!"

"Hey, hey, wait a moment." the hawk interrupted, backpedaling. "No need to get hasty."

"Shut up, bird," Deidara retorted, sending a venomous glare in its direction.

The hawk was in front of him before he could do anything more than jerk his head backwards. It had to turn its head to study him with one, large eye. "You don't talk that way to a hawk."

"I believe I just did, yeah."

Shinjiro knew what was coming next. He knew it, and it still didn't prepare him for it. Hawks as a summoned animal were temperamental creature. In fact, he was the only one who had ever dared to talk back to them. Even Takamaru showed them a certain amount of respect. And Shinjiro had never heard anyone tell one of the proud birds to shut up. So he knew it was coming, but it didn't mean he liked it.

The hawk dropped Shinjiro (and Takamaru), and brought both legs up to try to rip Deidara to shreds. Shinjiro didn't see the outcome of the assault, as he was suddenly tumbling back towards the surface of the hard, unforgiving canyon below. Only this time, the hawk wouldn't be rescuing them. Somehow, death didn't scare him as much as it probably should. Because he would be taking Takamaru with him.

Takamaru was currently trying to wrestle his way out from under Shinjiro, at least upright again so he could try to halt their descent. Shinjiro wasn't going to let him. A kamikaze was still a style of attack. And his main goal in life right now was to attack Takamaru, regardless of how.

And just as he was fully prepared for dying that way, the two hit the ground.

The ground was a lot closer than he'd thought. Mostly because Shinjiro was able to at least get back up onto his hands and knees. He wasn't dead. He knelt, watching his hands shake. He glanced towards Takamaru, who he had landed on; he wasn't moving, but he was breathing. Shinjiro looked around, but was interrupted when his body overloaded the shock and informed him violently of his injuries.

The fall had pushed the feather farther through his shoulder, and had nearly pinned him to Takamaru. It appeared as if the other man's chakra armor absorbed a lot of the impact, based on the way little bits of the white stuff was littered around them, looking like some sort of bizarre shell. Most of it was off of Takamaru now as well. Shinjiro probably would've tried to kill him as he lay there, but the fall had pushed the feather in at a different angle, and it felt like it had ruptured something important. So now he was on all fours again, coughing up blood that shouldn't have been in his lungs to begin with. At least two ribs were cracked (if not totally broken) too, and he could tell that one ankle was probably sprained. The only consolation that Takamaru would be in worse condition than he was.

As the coughing subsided, Shinjiro collapsed on his side, just concentrating on maintaining his breathing. He heard fighting below him, and dimly realized that Asoka must have used some sort of earth jutsu to create this rock for them to land on, probably saving both their lives. He made a note to give him a raise if they made it through this.

Shinjiro reopened his hazel eyes, noticing the blood all around him. He grinned just like Takamaru then.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The fight continues! With our guys off to a rocky (only slight pun intended) start, can they regain their footing in time to turn the tables? Shinjiro summons even more of the birds, which only serves to complicate things. Deidara decides to find out which is better-his art or the real thing-when he tries to escape Shinjiro's hawk. Who can go higher? Who can go faster? More importantly, which packs the bigger punch? Next time, on Dark Knight: Clay vs. Feathers!

Clay VS Feathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara had fought many different people and things in his life, but a giant hawk was a first for him. And it was rather embarrassing, because he was *losing*. It was much faster in the air than he was, and he couldn't get away long enough to do any sort of sculpting. He supposed he was fortunate that his bird hadn't been forcefully detonated yet.

He logically knew what he should do to turn the tables. He just didn't want to. But after a few more minutes of ducking and jumping and other acrobatics while trying to keep his own clay bird under him, Deidara figured he'd had enough. He waited until the hawk was going in with a wing again, and just let it hit him. He was surprised at the force invested in it, and tried to ignore the bruises it would most certainly leave. At least he didn't feel anything break. The artist tumbled over the wing of his bird, and was falling. Finally free of the hawk.

Or so he thought.

He had barely gotten under the clay creature when the hawk caught him in its kunai-like talons. And this wasn't a gentle catch, either; it dug those claws in *deep*. Deidara just supposed he was lucky, again, that it missed his head. As it was, he couldn't even be sure if it penetrated anything vital. He just knew that several talons were suddenly embedded in his back and chest, and they *hurt*.

One arm was pinned to his side, but his other was free. The hawk was diving, again, and Deidara knew that the added momentum meant it was going to hurt more when he hit the ground. He hastily motioned his other bird down, but it was too late. It couldn't keep up with their plunging speed. The blonde whipped his head around, trying to get his hair out of his eyes, and then noticed that they were going a *lot* faster than what he'd thought.

He only had one shot, then. It took a few tries to get his fist past the talon, but eventually he plunged his hand into the clay in his bag. He tore a piece off, and then had to fight to get it back up into his mouth. But once he was chewing, Deidara knew he was in the clear. Swallowing, he shouted into the rushing wind, "*Jibaku Bunshin no jutsu!*"

It was slightly tricky, timing it properly, but it allowed him to wiggle out while the hawk dropped the expanding clone. The real Deidara landed horizontally on the nearest rock face, tilting his head to the side in order to watch the falling clone. It exploded midair, just close enough for the force of it to ruffle his hair. Now that his hands were free, he busied them with forming some new birds. Another owl, and a double-winged hummingbird in case he'd have to race the hawk. Because it *was* faster than his other bird, at least.

Speaking of which, the other bird finally reached him, and he jumped back onto its back. This time, too, he made the precaution of pushing a bit of chakra down into his feet, for extra traction. Something told him he'd have to do some fancy flying today.

The hawk had spotted him again, but for some reason, didn't pursue him. Deidara soon found out why. It swooped down to pick up Shinjiro, since it had dropped him earlier. He felt the breath catch in his throat when he spotted Takamaru beside him, however. Both of them appeared to be laying in a puddle of blood.

Deidara was halfway across the canyon before the hawk managed to nudge a half-conscious Shinjiro onto its back. He sent his hummingbird on ahead to try to cut them off, but the hawk was in flight again before it reached them. He succeeded in scaring them away from Takamaru, though. That was a good thing, right? He leapt off of the cliff a few meters away, barely catching the edge of the cliff as he ran towards the motionless Takamaru. He nearly slipped in all of the blood, but it looked as if a lot of it was Shinjiro's.

He was still breathing. That was good. Deidara knelt and pulled him into a sitting position, brushing his bangs over one shoulder to try to gauge the exact damage. Mostly just superficial wounds, though the (now broken) arrow through his chest was slightly disconcerting. The blonde snapped the tip off and pulled it out, after checking to make sure it wasn't poisoned. Apparently Shinjiro wasn't as adept at poisons as Sasori. Not that that was a bad thing.

Deidara picked him up and half-threw him over his shoulder. Easier said than done, considering Takamaru had at least twenty kilos and half a meter on him. *Somehow* he managed to half-carry, half-drag him over to his waiting clay bird, and tossed him over the figure's neck like a sack of sand. Takamaru groaned, and slowly raised his head. "That hurt," he said flatly.

"Nice to see you're still conscious, yeah," Deidara said briskly, jumping onto his bird. He'd have to stay standing, even if it was a bit more difficult to maneuver. He needed his legs free. "But so is Shinjiro, so if you want this to finish today, we're going to have to figure out how to take out his hawk. If we can get him on the ground..."

"Can you—"

"Nope," Deidara said without waiting to see what question it was. "It's faster than I am, it's stronger, and I don't feel like seeing who can do the riskiest maneuvers, yeah."

"Then how are we going to beat it? I don't think I could do much more than glide at this point. Unless you have a soldier pill for me?"

Deidara looked guiltily down at his feet. "Uhh, no."

"What? You *always* have a soldier pill. It's like a drug for you!" Takamaru exclaimed, rolling his eyes.

"They were confiscated," he replied evasively. "And I'm, uh, kind of trying to stop eating them so much..."

"Why? Out of reverence? Did that little redheaded bastard do it?" Takamaru pushed himself up onto his knees, glaring down over the edge of the bird's neck. "I'll snap him in half if he's trying to change you—"

"No, not him! Nevermind, yeah," Deidara replied sourly, sighing. "The point is, you're useless—"

"I resent that."

"—and the real hawk is better than my clay one."

Takamaru ran a hand through his hair, messing up his ponytail. He didn't seem to mind, however. Instead he just tilted his head to one side, and thought. Deidara looked up instead, keeping an eye on Shinjiro. Apparently he and his hawk were trying to formulate a plan as well. Even if they were outmatched, Deidara could still detonate his as a last resort... And then, with that thought, a plan started to form.

-.-.-

Asoka was harder to fight than they'd originally planned on. Or rather, he was harder to *catch*. He jumped in and out of the stone around them like it was water, and Hinata knew that neither she or Neji stood a chance of catching him. Sukeru pulled out an interesting assortment of earth based jutsu, but even she couldn't pull him out of the rock. At least they could watch where he was going with the Byakugan.

It was more than annoying; it was infuriating. It was now three against one (with that other man taken out almost accidentally by Karura) and Asoka *still* had time to help Shinjiro. He was the one who had made a roof-like rock protrude from the top of the cliff to catch him from his fall, and had even the gall to take a few potshots in Deidara's general direction. Granted, it looked like he was doing little more than throwing oversized rocks at them, but it still irked the three stuck below on the canyon's path.

"We need to get him away from the rock," Sukeru sighed, crossing her arms.

"To *where*? There's nothing *but* rock around here," Neji pointed out crossly. "We just need to corner him is all."

"How do you propose we do that?" she asked, her blue green eyes glinting dangerously. "We've tried shaking him out, we've tried pulling him out, we've even tried pushing him out. There's not a lot of options left for us."

While the other two bickered, Hinata was busy staring up at the cliff beside them with her Byakugan. Asoka was sitting on the top, back lighted again by the sun. His feet were hanging over the edge limply, and he appeared to just be watching them. He knew that he could get away before they even made it halfway to the top if they decided to pursue him.

"Niisan," she called, still staring at their enemy, "He hasn't seen the *Kaiten* yet, right?"

"No, he hasn't. Why?"

"Think it would catch him off guard long enough for me to make a few seals?" She turned to the other two with a smile. A look of dawning comprehension slowly came over Neji's features, and he nodded. Sukeru took a few more moments, but eventually caught on as well.

Neji planted his foot on the vertical stone near him, taking a moment to get himself properly stuck to it. Sukeru took a different approach, instead backing up to the edge of the path, and taking a running start. Both of them were about at the halfway point up before Asoka's silhouette finally disappeared. Hinata started making the signs.

He appeared out of the cliff's side near Neji, predictably. As he reached out to pull the brunette back into the rock with him—a technique he seemed to favor—the Hyuuga prodigy threw himself into a spin. Asoka pulled his hand back after receiving a nasty chakra burn, and seemed completely nonplussed by this technique. His confusion only lasted a moment, but it gave Sukeru enough time to make her own signs. The startled foe was suddenly thrown violently out of the rock as it shook with a miniature earthquake. He created a spike of rock just below him to catch himself, but by then it was too late.

"*Kaihou Omoi: Yuuki no jutsu!*" Hinata shouted below. Thanks to the fall, Asoka was just within

range of the genjutsu. He looked down in alarm towards her when she first cast it, but then ran back into the rock without any obvious effects. Sukeru landed lightly besides Hinata, putting one hand on her hip. Neji took an easier approach, instead running back down before returning to the path.

"Did that do *anything*?" Sukeru asked. Neji glared at the back of her head, but she ignored him.

"Just wait," Hinata replied with a smirk. "He'll be out of the rock soon." After all, Asoka was a cautious man. That much was obvious from his fighting style. But with the genjutsu, he would have a sudden, overwhelming dose of overconfidence. He'd come to get them soon enough. Hinata just hoped that he didn't have any more tricks up his sleeve when he did.

-.-.-

Shinjiro was surprised when Deidara (who had retrieved Takamaru) guided his bird up to their level. The hawk backed up to avoid another surprise Karura, but it seemed as if the other blonde had a different plan in mind. Or maybe the Karura bomb was a one-time deal. Shinjiro didn't know, but he wasn't complaining.

"What are you two doing? It's suicide coming up here at this point," he pointed out bluntly. Takamaru shrugged from his seated position. "We are faster and stronger and generally better. You can't win an aerial battle."

"Hey, hawkie-kins," Deidara shouted suddenly, grinning broadly, "Can't catch me, you stupid, ugly, pathetic excuse for a sparrow, yeah!"

That got the hawk's blood boiling. Shinjiro barely had time to duck down and grab a fistful of feathers before they shot off towards the clay hawk. Deidara directed his bird straight upward. Shinjiro snickered; did he really think hiding in the sun's brightness would save him again? Hawks had better eyesight than humans, and it'd pick him out before he could get to it.

True, they had the advantage of distance, but the feathered hawk was faster than the clay one. Shinjiro squinted through his goggles to see that Deidara and Takamaru were conversing. Probably trying to work out the kinks in their so-called plan. Not that it was getting them very far thus far. The hawk below him was steadily catching up. (True, its real speed lay in its dives and it was smart of the other two for thinking of a straight up chase, but they still wouldn't get away.)

When Deidara and his clay bird disappeared into the clouds above, Shinjiro thought he knew what their plan was. Hide in the clouds, huh? Well two could play it that way. Since the clouds were separating them, he took the time to run his bloody fingers down his wrists. He had coated his hands in blood earlier from his fall, and he *was* a summoner, after all. After a few seals and just before they reached the clouds, two more, slightly smaller, hawks appeared in puffs of smoke on his right and left.

Shinjiro was honestly surprised when they got above the cloud level and Deidara was still climbing above them. He had expected him to hide in the clouds. *What are they playing at?* he asked himself, motioning the other two hawks, which had split up to search through the clouds, upwards.

And then, as the two hawks shot out above him, he figured out their plan. Too bad it was too late

now.

-.-.-

"We've got him now!" Deidara shouted. Takamaru just nodded, unable to waste his breath talking.

Clay didn't need to breathe, so they had found their advantage: altitude. True, it slowed them down painfully in the thin air, but the hawks suffered from the same disability up here. They were now all higher than even the clouds; white was spread out all below them like some sort of sea. It was colder up here as well, but again, that would only hurt the birds.

Unfortunately, neither of them had counted on the fact that he'd summon *more* hawks. They had been counting on the single, overly large one, who was already burdened with carrying Shinjiro and was already tired. The larger the bird, the more oxygen it needed, so it would be at the greatest disadvantage. Two smaller, freshly summoned hawks were a surprise for them both.

Deidara ducked the first one, but the second caught his jaw with its talons as it streaked by. He swore loudly, but at least it hadn't gotten his neck. Then he might have been in serious trouble. As it was, it was bloody as hell, but it wasn't life-threatening. For the moment. He made a wild grab for the two birds, but they danced out of his reach, grinning like only birds could.

"How are we going to combat this?!" Takamaru yelled, chest heaving to try to keep up with the need for oxygen. The two birds wheeled around in the clear sky and dove back down towards them, this time clearly aiming for the clay they were riding on.

Deidara solved the problem by throwing the miniature owl he'd made earlier in their direction. It grew to full size in a puff of smoke, just in time for each raptor to slam into its wings. The pair dropped like stones. Unfortunately, they righted themselves once more at about Shinjiro's height. The large hawk and its master were hovering below them, unwilling to stray any farther into the thin air.

The owl dove down to combat them, keeping them at bay. Then it was merely as simple as dropping bombs on Shinjiro from their height advantage. The hawk dodged all of them, but they weren't trying to actually *hit* it (at least not yet); they just wanted to tire it out. And by the look of it, they were doing a good job at it.

Unfortunately, Deidara had made a mistake in counting the other two hawks out. They managed to push the owl back until it was too close for his comfort, and then ripped into it with talons and beaks. The resulting explosion caught the bird they were riding, and the two Iwa-nin had to abandon it in a leap to make it clear of the bang.

Deidara was surprised when he felt something halt his fall. Of course, it wasn't a good surprise when he found out it was one of the hawks, struggling valiantly to keep airborne with his weight. He looked over, expecting Takamaru to be in the same predicament, but the silver-haired man was nowhere in sight. Deidara started struggling, kicking and flailing to try to unbalance the poor hawk, but to no avail. Its claws were dug in deep into his shirt and shoulder.

It carried him down to Shinjiro and the larger hawk. Deidara still hadn't spotted Takamaru. Had they *really* let him fall like that?! "Well, well, it was a heroic try, really. And I must admit, no one has ever thought to try to starve my birds of oxygen like this." He spread his hands over the sea of

clouds, shaking his head in mild disbelief. Deidara scowled at him, but lost a bit of the malice when he saw how the larger hawk was eyeing him.

And they were descending, too. Shinjiro was taking them all back to safer air. Deidara struggled harder. With the position, only one of his hands could get into his clay, but Shinjiro spotted this. He reached out and stopped the movement with a smile. "No, no, no need for such things. Keep your art to yourself. Not everyone likes it."

"Fuck you, yeah." Deidara already had the mouth on his palm chewing. They had almost reached the tops of the clouds when he tossed the snake at Shinjiro with a hand sign. It burst into life and wrapped itself around the shocked man, sinking clay teeth into his neck. Too bad it was only clay; if he had a bit of Sasori's poison, that would have wrapped the fight up then and there.

The large hawk decided to take out the source of the problem while Shinjiro struggled with the serpent. It spread one wing and caught Deidara's chest with it, throwing both him and the smaller hawk into the clear air. The bird had the sense to let go, however, and had soon righted itself. Deidara had no such luck.

He hit the clouds before he could even reach his clay. He was already sculpting a new bird by the time he was soaked with all of the moisture.

That was when he hit something.

Deidara felt himself grabbed under the armpits, and suddenly most of his momentum was gone. The blonde looked up through the haze of the clouds to see Takamaru, struggling to keep both of them aloft. "Damn, you've gotten heavy," he grunted, flapping his wings for all they were worth. The clouds around them were blown away, and Deidara soon realized that their position would be compromised.

"Let go of me!" He elbowed Takamaru in the stomach, and the older man let go of him immediately. Deidara dropped again, but this time he caught himself with a double-winged hummingbird. It was his fastest bird, and now that Shinjiro knew he'd try to get back up into thinner air, he needed it. Their advantage was shot, and their only hope now was to try to catch Shinjiro with a bomb.

Which would have been a lot easier if Deidara hadn't ran out of clay with his next bird.

-.-.-

Just like Hinata said, Asoka was soon out of the stone. And while he wasn't nearly as fast or hard to catch, he was hard to hold on to. He broke Sukeru's leg with a sweeping kick and nearly shattered Neji's arm when he had to block an uppercut. Still, his arm wasn't broken (because he definitely was *not* letting Hinata set it again) so he could still fight.

Asoka was now fighting as recklessly as Lee or Naruto. And unfortunately, he packed more of a punch than either of them.

Sukeru was slowed significantly, and was now resorting to trying to catch him with a bit of ninjutsu. Hinata was stuck with trying to snare him in another genjutsu, keeping out of his grasp. Neji was the only one in close combat. He just kept telling himself it was just like sparring with Lee. Hard punches versus the *Juuken* style. And he'd won nearly every time, hadn't he?

But forcing his chakra into Asoka's body seemed to be having no effect. It didn't slow him down, it didn't make him show any strain. Even though Neji could *see* his own chakra in the man's body. It gave him the occasional chakra burn, but that was the only effect it seemingly had. At this point, he could only hope that eventually it would overload his system, or Hinata or Sukeru could catch him in a jutsu.

As he was thinking this, Asoka somehow made it under his guard. For a brief moment, Neji could have sworn he was Lee; the way he was coming up for a punch was identical. He moved to block, but his own movements seemed sluggish and delayed. Asoka rammed his shoulder into his chest with enough force to snap several ribs and who knew what else to his insides. Neji supposed he was just fortunate it didn't send him off the edge. He skidded to a halt on the path several meters away, unable to get up until he got oxygen back into his lungs.

The brunette cursed under his breath when he saw blood dripping out of his shirt. He just pressed a palm over it to try to stop some of the bleeding, trying to figure out what else his ribs had done. The irony was not lost on him; for the time being, Neji's own body was his biggest threat. He waved toward Hinata, hating himself for forcing her to take over while he ran diagnostics. She just nodded, worry obvious in her eyes even from this distance. He made a note not to let her come to any of his fights from then on. More often than not, he was too busy worrying about her to keep his own footing.

Three broken ribs, two cracked ones. That in, in itself, wasn't so bad. Considering it was from one blow, though, it *was* bad. And what was worse was the fact that one rib was poking out of his chest slightly, causing the blood. It must have rotated outward from the impact of the fall. The other two broken ones had very narrowly escaped puncturing vital organs, for which he was thankful. The rest of it could be fixed later.

Neji shakily stood up, glaring at Asoka from under his hair. There had to be something else here... There was no way a single strike was that powerful without something else. He watched dispassionately as Sukeru and Hinata ducked and dodged Asoka's reckless punches and kicks. Asoka's body was certainly sturdy, but there was nothing amiss. Unless he had already done something to it earlier. And now that he thought about it, Neji *had* been surprised that his *Juuken* had done so little damage...

Then it hit him. And he could have hit his head against the nearest rock for not seeing it before. Asoka had done something to himself to change his body structure. It was why he could jump in and out of the rock with no effort and no seals. It was why he was so dense and solid. He had turned himself to living stone.

"Great," he grumbled, rolling one shoulder to make sure it wasn't dislocated. How did one fight a moving rock?

Neji watched for a few moments longer, trying to figure out if there was a method to Asoka's wild rampage. Aside from alternating between kicks and punches, nothing immediately jumped out at him. Though the regular change was interesting, and could definitely be used to his advantage. Neji timed his return. When Hinata burst into a flock of startled ravens from a too-close swing, he decided to step back in.

A kick towards Sukeru, and then a punch—and then Neji reached him. Asoka turned around and turned it into a windmill kick, which the brunette genius hastily ducked. He also sidestepped the following uppercut, and managed to get a forceful *Juuken* strike into the man's stomach before he backed away carefully.

Overloading his heart was the easiest strategy to come up with, though at this rate it would take

much too long. Neji calmed his breathing as he thought. If Asoka was rock... He couldn't be that fast. In fact, most of his speed came from his still unpredictable fighting style and going in and out of the rock around them. If they could somehow take that away from him...

"Hinata," he called over his shoulder. She had reappeared behind him, shaken from the close call. The kunoichi looked up at the sound of her name, and Neji said quickly, "Do you have any genjutsu that would make him move?"

Hinata furrowed her brow for a moment, going through her mental list of genjutsu. "Like... a blinding genjutsu?"

"That would work perfectly."

"Okay then." She started making the seals, while Neji ducked under another punch and brought his knee up into Asoka's stomach. It was like hitting a brick wall. "Close!"

Neji squeezed his eyes shut, and barely shut off the Byakugan in time. Unfortunately, Asoka, while trapped in the genjutsu, was not immobilized. He swung his arm around in a haymaker that threw Neji against the canyon wall like a rag doll. He dropped to the ground, hastily back flipping to avoid another blow, reopening his eyes only when he nearly ran into Hinata. "Did it work?"

"It should have. He shouldn't be able to see a thing now."

As if to test it, Sukeru carefully limped towards him as silently as she could. Asoka was looking around, listening for movement. She got within arm's range, and he still hadn't reacted. Then, her foot slipped and hit a rock, which tumbled into the canyon with a clatter. Asoka reacted instantly, grabbing her around the shoulders and heaving her bodily out into the canyon.

She caught herself with a hasty earth jutsu which made a stone bridge beneath her. But like any good shinobi, Asoka could still fight by sound alone. He dropped into the rock below his feet before either Neji or Hinata could catch him, and stepped out onto Sukeru's bridge just a moment later. She jumped up to get away, but he caught her by the ankle and slammed her down against the rock. Neji jumped down behind him, timing his landing with her impact, and slowly snuck up on Asoka.

He put both hands on his back, directly over his beating heart, and pushed all of his free chakra into Asoka's body. He knew Hinata had done this before, with Juugo, but he had always had more chakra than her. It was nothing short of electrocuting him. He dropped Sukeru at Neji's touch, thankfully, otherwise she would have gotten some and diluted the power.

Even with the overkill of chakra, Asoka sluggishly turned around and grabbed Neji by the throat. This didn't alarm the brunette greatly; he had only meant to slow the other man down. As Asoka lifted him by the neck, Neji kicked him. His toes caught him under the chin, with enough strength to send him stumbling backward. His grasp loosened, and Neji dropped to the ground, sweeping Asoka's feet out from under him. He slammed down on his back, heavy enough to actually crack the stone beneath them.

And just like Neji had thought he would, he rolled to the side to get back up. Too bad there wasn't a side to roll on to. One with the rock or not, there was no way Asoka could have known the width of Sukeru's rock bridge.

Asoka went over the edge, barely catching himself by the tips of the fingers of one hand. He dangled there, blinded and unable to pull himself back up. Neji just walked calmly over to him, glancing at Sukeru out of the corner of his eye as she picked herself back up. "Okay, so now

what?" she asked, pulling a kunai out of the pouch strapped to her leg. "You want to do the honors or should I?"

"If I'm dying," Asoka grunted, and Neji realized that it was the first time they heard him speak. His voice was low and harsh. It was perfect for someone with the density of rock. "Then I'm taking you with me."

He let go. Neji's eyes widened, but then he realized that Asoka had done it to make hand signs. He was out of sight before he finished. Even with the Byakugan, Neji could see him hit the ground. Or whether or not he completed the jutsu; nothing happened.

Then, the rock below their feet began to tremble. At first, he thought it was another landslide, but then he realized it was much, much more dangerous. A full-blown earthquake. And with earth all around them, they couldn't do anything to stop it.

-.-.-

Shinjiro ducked out of the clouds just in time to see the tail of Deidara's hummingbird head back up into them. "Okay, I have two birds now, so we better make this work, yeah!" he shouted. Takamaru, on his way up out over the sea of clouds once more, nodded.

Predictably, from the sound of his voice, the two smaller hawks zipped up through the clouds in their direction. Takamaru, hidden from their eyes due to his remaining pure white chakra armor and the fact that they had all thought he'd fallen, reached out and caught one of them. He snapped its wings and dropped it, flapping his wings to move to catch the other.

Unfortunately, the other hawk had spotted him by that time and wheeled out of his grasp. Fortunately, Deidara managed to snag it with his eagle's talons, holding it captive. It let out a cry of distress, and he decided it was better to kill the thing now. A simple squeeze broke it, and the clay eagle dropped it just as the whoosh of displaced air announced Shinjiro's presence.

The four of them (counting the largest hawk that still wanted to eat Deidara for lunch) burst out of the clouds up into the thin air once more. Shinjiro was staying near them, though; he wasn't getting caught where his bird couldn't fly. Or breathe. Deidara circled around above him, his eagle following the hummingbird he was riding on. Takamaru hovered off to the side, watching Shinjiro intently.

"What now?" Shinjiro shouted up to them.

"Someone's going to die. We're finishing this, Shinjiro," Takamaru yelled down in reply. Shinjiro just nodded solemnly.

"It's not going to be me!"

On cue, the eagle suddenly folded both wings to its sides and dropped out of the sky, directly over Shinjiro and his hawk. The feathered bird got out of the way just in time with a barrel roll, but the eagle caught itself with outspread wings just below them, and shot back towards them. Deidara was intent on finishing this *now*, so his eagle wasn't going to let them get away.

The hawk barrel rolled again, this time extending its legs to try to shred the eagle. The clay bird narrowly avoided detonation, and instead tried to catch Shinjiro, on top of the hawk. The

summoned bird would have none of this, and flapped upward to try to outflank the eagle's movement. The two birds of prey twirled and flapped just out of each other's reach, circling each other warily.

Unfortunately, the eagle was matched just with the hawk. Shinjiro was still there.

He calmly reached back to the bow on his back, and notched an arrow. Before Deidara could pull his last bird out of the way, it was struck through the hollow eye with an arrow. Shinjiro pulled on the rope attached to it, yanking it towards his hawk before it detonated. For a brief moment, Deidara thought he was stupid enough to actually kill himself with the eagle.

No such luck. With a maneuver Deidara wouldn't have even tried on his own bird, the hawk flipped upside-down and *kicked* the detonating eagle upwards towards Deidara. He didn't see how the hawk managed to right itself again, but he at least managed to get out of the way of the explosion.

He had one bird left, and he was riding it.

Deidara knew what he had to do now.

Luckily, the hummingbird seemed faster than the hawk. And he had the element of surprise. He merely had the hummingbird drop out of the sky like a rock, angling towards Shinjiro and his hawk, which were just now turning around to face him. The astonishment and disbelief on Shinjiro's face made it worth it.

Something suddenly collided with Deidara, throwing him off of the bird. He looked up to see Takamaru, grinning at him, before he fell below sight. The blonde started yelling every obscenity known to man (or at least Hidan) as he watched Takamaru push the hummingbird the rest of the way towards Shinjiro.

Only the hawk was already moving, flapping its massive wings to get out of the way—

Takamaru made it to them first, grabbing the hawk around the neck and keeping one wing still with his legs. The hummingbird made it to its target just as Deidara dropped into the clouds and lost sight of them.

At least he got to hear the explosion.

The blonde crossed his arms, unable to do anything more than damn Takamaru for taking his artistic death from him. Now he'd just go splat and that'd be the end of it. Such a death was unbecoming of an Akatsuki member!

Deidara felt something hit his back, and it stung. He pulled it out of the fabric of his uniform, frowning when he saw it was a shard of a chakra feather. A moment later, another came down, and then what appeared to be a charred piece of a bird's leg. At least, he recognized the talon. Deidara reached out to try to grab it, but the sudden movement pitched him head over heels. Other bits and pieces shot out of the clouds, beating him downward from the force of the explosion.

A scorched, barely recognizable mass nearly hit him, and Deidara realized with a bit of glee that it was Shinjiro's body. Really, what was left of it, at any rate. The blonde looked up, trying to get his hair out of his eyes, just in time to have another piece of shrapnel from the explosion nearly hit him. His breath hitched when he realized it was Takamaru.

He was trailing blood and pieces of chakra armor and feathers, but more or less he was in one piece. Severely burned and still bleeding from his earlier fall, but at least the body was

recognizable. Deidara snagged his foot, pulling him up so that they were falling together. "I hate you!" he shouted into the wind.

Takamaru didn't stir.

"You didn't let me do things my way!" Deidara yelled, his voice lost in the rushing wind.

Still no reply. The blonde reached out and grabbed Takamaru by the shoulders, shaking him. Of course, he knew it was a dead body, but if he was going to die by fall, then he wanted to take his anger out on *something*, damn it.

"You always said for me to have my own style, damn it, and *that* was it!" He shook the body harder, finally giving up and letting go. Instead, as they (and all of the other bits leftover from the explosion; Deidara supposed that since Takamaru had been so close to it with his armor and wings to shield it, not all of it vaporized like planned) fell, he just stared at Takamaru's burned and peaceful face. It was one of the few times he saw him without his grin or curious stare. His hair had been partially burnt off, but it was still long enough to dangle above him in its ponytail.

Deidara patted him on the head. Then he crossed his arms and looked away, as best as he could, considering the rushing air restricted a lot of movement. "Fine. At least now I don't have to worry about you anymore, yeah..."

"You never worried about me in the first place, you brat."

Deidara's head snapped around so fast it gave him a crick in his neck. As he was swearing and trying to get rid of it, Takamaru chuckled hoarsely. "I *cannot* believe you're still alive, Takamaru. You're harder to get rid of than a cockroach. Or Sasori-danna, yeah."

"I really doubt I'm going to last that much longer, kiddo. If I'm being honest, I have to say that I can't feel anything. Except this annoying trickle of blood on my elbow that really tickles," he groused, cracking open a navy blue eye.

"Come on, you can at least have the courtesy of staying alive for the trip down, yeah," Deidara said, brow furrowing in concern.

"Heh, wishful thinking. Those bombs of yours pack a punch..."

"You're the one saying that nothing can break those chakra feathers of yours!" He didn't like the way his voice cracked, or how it sounded like he was begging. But it wasn't as if anyone could hear him.

"Sasori did, and I guess you did, too." He paused to cough, blood dripping up onto his cheek from the force of the wind. "You Akatsuki-nin really are something..."

Deidara felt guilty when he thought about Sasori. Oh well. He rubbed a wrist over his eyes, accidentally knocking his scope loose in the process. It scraped his cheek as it flew back up into the air. He made a mad grab for it, but it flew just out of his hands. Just what he needed.

"I guess, but we still have trouble with missions just like this—*oof*."

Suddenly, their fall was arrested by something that wasn't quite hard enough and much too high up to be the ground. Deidara heard something very loud and close to his ears crack, and his first worry was that his back had actually just broken. The wind was knocked out of him as well, and while that was certainly the least of his worries, it made trying to figure out what had just happened very difficult.

He opened his eyes, but saw nothing but the blue of the sky for a long moment. Someone said something, but he couldn't understand. Deidara was dimly aware of his own mouth opening and saying something, but he couldn't even understand *that*. Then, someone bent over him, and Deidara's sight finally faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: What just happened...?! Somehow, Deidara just made it through. But what of the others? Not everyone fared as well as he did, and he is pretty banged up. The mission finally ends, and the group returns to Ame...

Returned To The Land Of The Living

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara bolted upright, chest heaving. He looked around for some sign of something familiar, but it was all just dim around him. Then, the adrenaline subsided and the pain set in. With a grunt he clutched his chest and dropped back onto the bed, waiting for the pain to abate. He even held his breath, but that didn't seem to help much.

After what felt like much too long for it to be normal, Deidara felt it melt away as he gasped for breath once more. He slowly brought his hand up, but something held it back. He raised his head just enough to see that it was in a sling. Then, blinking, he realized that his scope was missing and so was his bangs. He brought his other hand up to inspect, but what felt like fire shot through to his shoulder, and he dropped it back down hastily.

So Deidara was left laying motionless in the dark, wondering what had fucked him up so badly.

After an indiscernible amount of time, he heard the door open. Light from the hallway spilled into his room, and he had to shut his eyes to stop from being blinded by it. Someone stepped lightly across the room and sat down carefully by the foot of the bed. The same somehow placed her hand on his own, murmuring, "Deidara-kun..."

"Bya-chan, why do I hurt?" he rasped. She jumped enough that he felt her leave the bed, and her hand immediately disappeared from his own. He missed it.

"De-Deidara-kun! You're awake!" Hinata squealed, leaning up to stare at him intently. She put a hand on his forehead, and he realized he couldn't feel it. His head must be bandaged, then. It would account for why his hair was tied back, then... Or rather, he *hoped* it was tied back. He didn't want a haircut. "How do you feel?"

"Like a bug under someone's sandal." He sat up again, this time ignoring the pain in his chest. It had diminished slightly, anyway. He looked around while she tried to gently push him back down. "Where are we...?"

"Back at Takamaru's house, now lay back down! You're much too hurt to be up already!" she admonished, finally pushing him back onto the bed. Deidara rolled his eyes, sighing.

"So that wasn't a bad dream? Fighting Shinjiro?"

"No..." Hinata replied, looking away.

He closed his eyes, exhaling again. They snapped open a moment later, and he bolted back up, only to feel a sense of déjà vu when the pain forced him back down. Once Hinata was done fretting about him and he could breathe again, he asked forcefully, "What about Takamaru?"

"Oh, he's..." the way her voice left off wasn't reassuring. Deidara propped himself up on his elbows, which was a lot more difficult than he would have imagined with one of them in a sling.

"Bya-chan, what about Takamaru," he repeated lowly, tilting his head to try to catch her eye.

"He's... conscious? He regained consciousness earlier today?" The way her voice rose in a question made his mouth go dry. It was amazing that he was awake (and that he beat Deidara to

consciousness), but if that was the best she could do... "I-I've been told you can't see him for awhile."

"What is wrong with him? What condition is he in?"

She looked away, biting her bottom lip.

"*Hinata*, what is wrong with Takamaru?!"

She looked startled—and slightly hurt—from the harsh tone he'd adopted, but at least it got her looking at him again. "Third degree burns all along his back, one shoulder, and neck. Several dozen minor scrapes and gashes. A severe hole through his chest from Shinjiro's arrow. Major internal bleeding. Three broken fingers, one sprained wrist, one broken wrist, one broken vertebrae near his neck—but somehow that hasn't really impaired him—thirteen broken ribs, one cracked rib, one displaced hip, one broken arm, two broken legs, and a broken foot," she recited dutifully.

Deidara let himself fall back onto the bed, wondering how the man was still *alive*.

Hinata continued, almost regretfully. "We think he might also have a concussion, but we can't be sure at this point. And... we're not sure if he'll ever walk again. He's definitely not going to do any more fighting..." She trailed off, twiddling her fingers.

"That's irrelevant," he muttered, turning his face to the wall. He could have sworn she nodded, but he couldn't have been sure. "But... he's still alive?"

"For the time being."

"Meaning...?"

"We've stopped the bleeding and treated the burns, and set all of the broken bones as best we can, but... he's messed up."

"To say the least, yeah," he said with a harsh laugh. Deidara frowned, and then turned to stare up at the ceiling. "I'm almost afraid to ask... but what about me?"

"Oh! You—You're pretty bad off, but much better than that. You should be able to return to fighting."

"*Should?!?*"

"I-I mean you will! You will!" she replied quickly, putting her hands up in front of her. "Just rest up and you will, I promise!"

Deidara studied her shrewdly for a moment, and then sighed. "You look fine, yeah."

Hinata giggled nervously, hiding her mouth behind a fist. "Um, yes. I actually was the least injured out of everyone, for once..."

"How is everyone else, then?" Deidara asked, changing the subject. He decided he didn't want to know what was messed up inside of him, after all.

"Neji-niisan's wrist has already healed. He's allowed out of bed tomorrow, too. And, umm, Sukerusan is doing alright, though she's not happy with the crutches. Sasori says she has to have them if she wants to keep the leg, and she's worried that he's not joking."

"How did Sasori-danna fare?" he asked, swallowing. If Hinata was the least hurt, and she already

went through Neji and Sukeru...

"He's fine. He's already fixed his shoulder and hand, since he's a... umm, yes." She pursed her lips and looked at the door. Then she turned back brightly to him. "But I'm glad you're finally awake! We were worried that you had gotten a concussion as well, but it seems as if you're alright."

"Is this arm broken?" He held up the one in the sling. "And can I walk, yeah?"

"No, it's not broken... I think. We set it anyway, just in case. It should be all right by now. And you could walk, if you wanted to be doubled over in pain. Better stay in bed for a few more days." Hinata stood up, straightening out her shirt as she did so. Deidara realized that she was wearing one of Neji's, and that it came down mid-thigh. He smiled ruefully, looking away.

"Bedridden... that sucks, yeah. Wait." Just as Hinata was sneaking out, he turned to her with a serious expression. "How long was I out?"

"Umm, yeah..." she poked her fingers together, casting about for something to say. "It was only a week and a half!"

"*Only?*" he squawked, sitting back up.

"Y-Yes! Hold on, I'm going to go get Sasori! I-I'm sure he'll be pleased to see you're awake!" And with that, she fled the room, closing the door loudly behind her.

Deidara huffed and crossed his arms angrily. Just great.

Sasori sighed when Hinata pranced into the room. He closed the book he'd been reading, and turned to regard her over one shoulder. "What now?" He wasn't in the best of moods, after having to baby-sit everyone for almost two weeks. Especially when his only help had been the meek kunoichi.

"Deidara-kun is awake!" she chirped happily, beaming at him. Sasori looked down at his lap, and then back up at her, unsure of how to take this. If Deidara was awake again, it meant that the mission would now continue. Though it hardly seemed fair to kill a bedridden target.

Oh well, Sasori never had possessed a conscience. He stood up, tossing his book onto the chair he'd just vacated. "So then everyone is awake. That's... good."

"Yes, it is," she agreed, rocking back on her heels. For a moment, both of them just stood there, unsure of what to say. They had gotten along for the past two weeks as well as could be expected, considering their past. It almost seemed like something was coming to an end. Hinata hastily bowed her head in his direction, and then turned, calling, "I'm going to go check on Sukeru-san and Neji-niisan, then!"

"Good luck with that," he replied dryly, running a hand through his hair. He decided he might as well see Deidara now, get it over with. No doubt he'd have a million questions for him...

He was nearly run into by Sukeru in the hallway, who had ditched the crutches yet again. She didn't look particularly happy to see him, but she just apologized, ducked out of his way, and

padded off to Takamaru's room. Sasori let her go, figuring if she wanted to ruin the leg it was her fault. Moreover, it wasn't as if it mattered at this point.

When he walked into Deidara's room, he expected brooding. Or shouting. But not Deidara already out of bed, stretching. Sasori was shocked at this, but his blonde, *very injured* partner just glanced at him out of the corner of his eye (which was now uncovered by the bangs). It looked as if he had gotten up by sheer willpower alone. "I'm going to see Takamaru," was all Deidara said.

"You're going to get back in bed before I break more of your bones."

"I'm going to see Takamaru, Sasori-danna," he repeated firmly, pausing in stretching an arm to glare at him.

"Deidara, you are injured. Possibly more injured than you have ever been before in your life. And you are going to get back in that bed before I make you," Sasori said, lowering his voice. If they were going to butt heads over this, then he was going to dig his feet in now.

Deidara took in the threat, and then sat down on the bed. But that was all the farther he moved. "Now can I see Takamaru?"

The redhead had the foresight to close the door then. Without turning around, he just said, "No."

"I want to see him, yeah."

"I want you to get back in that bed and heal up," Sasori retorted.

"I'm fine. See?" As proof, the idiot blonde held up both hands—the sling had gone missing, it seemed—and wiggled all his fingers.

"It ruins the effect when your head and chest are still bandaged enough to make you look like a mummy," he pointed out, finally turning around. "You're lucky you didn't *die*, Deidara."

"I was prepared for it. What'd I hit, anyway?" Deidara returned easily, raising both eyebrows.

"*Me*." Sasori deadpanned, snorting. "That bird you set me on?"

The younger artist was temporarily speechless. Sasori relished this for the brief moment it lasted. "But... you can't even mold chakra, let alone control someone else's jutsu, yeah..."

"Deidara, I am a *puppeteer*."

"Oh." Deidara looked down at his hands sheepishly for forgetting such a crucial detail. "Wait, then why were you—"

"I was on my way up to see what was taking you so long. You and Takamaru hit the bird on my way up, and we all nearly died because of that. I saved your life," Sasori said snottily, smirking.

"Then that makes us even," Deidara replied, just as snottily. They glared at each other for a long time, each willing the other to speak first.

Sasori decided to break the silence, just because he knew what would displease Deidara more than his continue muteness. "Now that you're awake, the mission will continue."

"You saved Takamaru's life, and you want me to end it, yeah?"

"I told you, it was an accident."

"So you hadn't planned on saving us? Are you saying you want me to die, Sasori-danna?"

Sasori scowled and growled, "*No*. I am merely saying I hadn't been expecting it."

"Well then..." Deidara cast about for something else to say. "Well then... Sasori-danna, isn't it enough that Takamaru won't be a ninja anymore?"

He was caught off guard by the sudden pleading, and supposed that Hinata must have given him the full list of Takamaru's injuries. Sasori walked over and seated himself on Deidara's bed, crossing his arm and not looking at his partner. "No, it's not. You know that. You've *known* that. The orders were to kill the second Jashinist."

"He doesn't even act like one!" Deidara said desperately, turning to Sasori.

"That's beside the point. It's been proven that he is the target; he wears the necklace under his shirt and Sukeru said that he practices the religion when he's not fighting Shinjiro."

"But... Hidan doesn't even *know* him, yeah! We can—We can just bring back the necklace and give it to him and *say* that he's dead—"

Sasori turned to him coldly. Deidara blinked back tears, and Sasori couldn't help but grimace. "That's not how it works. Deidara, you're a damn shinobi. Akatsuki, even. You have to kill."

"N-Not Takamaru. He's like my *dad*—"

"Deidara, we all do painful things as ninja. Do you think I wanted to fight my own parents? My grandmother? Do you think I even wanted you to go on this mission?" Sasori burst out, seizing him by the shoulders. Deidara stared at him, and he had to look away. What was it about the blonde that made him say such stupid things...?

"You knew all along...?" he asked quietly.

"When you saw the photo, I had a hunch. I knew the first night," Sasori admitted, still looking away. "But the point remains. We all do things we don't want to do in this world. Might as well get used to it." He stood up, but Deidara grabbed his hand. He had no choice but to look at him.

"Please." It was one, simple word. Deidara knew he didn't need any other weapon.

"No." Sasori replied callously, because he knew if he didn't, he'd give in. Which was not how shinobi were supposed to act. What was it about Deidara that made people want to act more human than they would otherwise?

He pulled his hand out of Deidara's, and left him there. As he reopened the door, he said quietly, "Go back to bed. Not tonight, maybe not tomorrow night. You do need your rest." Sasori made the mistake of looking back at Deidara, and instantly regretted it. If he thought he'd looked bad after the Kumo incident, this was nothing. He looked *broken*.

As Sasori closed the door, he knew he'd have to be the one to kill Takamaru.

-.-.-

The days passed slowly. Deidara stayed in bed, usually not moving unless Hinata physically pulled

him out of it. Neji was apparently already up and walking again, and Sukeru had long since ditched the crutches. Only he and Takamaru remained in bad shape.

Sasori visited him often. They didn't talk of ninja, or the mission, or of Takamaru. In fact, they only really spoke of art. It was refreshing, but Deidara knew it was just a façade. It was the only way the redhead knew how to comfort him.

Deidara knew he needed it. He felt like his emotions were in the same state as Takamaru's body. He still hadn't seen him, either. He wasn't sure he wanted to. So the Iwa-nin just laid in bed, glad of Sasori's company.

He amused himself with thinking of trivial things, like Sasori, during the nights. (He hadn't slept since he woke up.) The more he thought about it, the more Deidara realized just how much Sasori meant to him. They had known each other about a year now, and they had come so far it was scary. He knew that he had honestly hated Sasori for a long while. What was frightening, though, was that Deidara didn't know exactly when that changed.

He used to think of Hinata that way. She was cute in behavior and pretty in looks, and Deidara had personally seen how far she'd come. She was motherly, too, and usually knew just what to say or do to cheer him up. But again, he didn't exactly know when, but it had changed. Was it when he had seen her kissing Neji? Or when he lost to Neji the last time they were all in Iwa? Or was it as far back as when he'd stopped seeing her as some prize...?

At least he could grasp what Hinata was to him. She was his best friend. Okay, maybe a best friend with *some* benefits, but that was it. With Neji in the picture, he knew he could never be anything more at this point.

Sasori, though, he was an enigma. Deidara never knew where he stood with the man. His actions and words were cold and biting, but at the same time, he would be painfully possessive and protective of him. He never knew how to act around him. Some days he wanted to stab that heart of his and never look at him again, and others, he couldn't take his eyes off him. Deidara at least had the sense to realize that this mission would be crucial in their relationship, whatever it may become.

Because he realized that Sasori intended to kill Takamaru for him.

Deidara wouldn't let that happen. He didn't know what he'd do to stop it, and how that would solve anything, unless Takamaru died first. And while his injuries were severe, it seemed as if he was slowly recuperating. Takamaru would make it, unless someone on this mission had the common sense to end it soon.

That day, Sasori visited him again. Deidara had never noticed how physical Sasori was until then. He would visibly be restraining himself from just touching Deidara. Whether it was playing with his hair, or checking his bandages, or just holding his hand. They talked about things Deidara couldn't even remember. He just knew that he had to do something about this, and soon.

"You're short, you know that?" Deidara said as Sasori stood up to leave.

The Suna-nin glared at him, and asked, "Where did that come from?"

"You're just... short. I just felt like informing you of this, yeah." To prove it, Deidara stood up as well, standing up straight to emphasize his point. Sasori pushed him back onto the bed, a bit more roughly than strictly necessary.

"Deidara, I was a kid when I turned this body into a puppet. That meant I wasn't done growing. I very well could have been much taller than you. ...Because, you know, you're not exactly tall yourself."

Deidara frowned. "Not-uh, yeah. I'm taller than Bya-chan."

"*Everyone* is taller than Hinata."

"Yeah, well... I like being taller than you."

"So you have one reason to tease me as opposed to all of the things I can find to torment you about?" Sasori asked dully.

"No, I think it's cute." Deidara smiled at him. It turned into a grin when he saw Sasori's reaction. It was the one he'd long ago pegged as 'this would be Sasori blushing if he was able to'. Soon enough, though, it passed and the redhead put his hands up to his temples.

"Deidara, please don't do that to me. Like I said, I've almost desensitized myself to you—"

"What if I don't want that?" he asked innocently, pouting. Sasori glared at him, though the fact that he hadn't put his hands down ruined it a bit.

"I'm leaving now," he replied brusquely, slamming the door on his way out. Deidara laughed once he was gone. Okay, maybe he *was* screwing with Sasori, but that was karma for you.

Later that night, Deidara knew that he was running out of time. And he knew that he had to be the one to kill Takamaru.

So he got up when he heard the clock in the hallway strike midnight. He crept silently out, making sure that everyone was fast asleep. Deidara actually found Sasori *sleeping*, too, which caught him off guard. He'd expected to have to sneak past him. The redhead was sprawled on the couch, one of his arms acting as a pillow. One leg was dangling off of the edge, the other propped up on the back of it. The blonde took a few moments to wonder how he had fallen asleep in *that* pose, of them all. He must really have been tired.

He briefly debated throwing a blanket over him, but then logic took back possession of his brain. Because Sasori wouldn't even *need* it, and more likely than not the movement would wake him.

So Deidara tiptoed past him, towards Takamaru's room. He stopped near the kitchen, though, intrigued by what he found. A large pile of broken feathers and pieces of his armor, thrown on the table haphazardly. Probably pried off of him when they had to dress his wounds. Interesting that no one had taken care of it yet, but then again, it had been a hectic few weeks. No one had the time.

Deidara selected one of the longer flight feathers from the pile. Its end was jagged, probably snapped off by the impact. Deidara would've given Takamaru the honor of dying by explosion, but it there wasn't a speck of clay in the house. He'd already searched. And it would have been fishy if someone had caught him trying to sneak out to get more. At this point, the highest honor he could give the other Iwa shinobi was death by his own hand. Sasori would kill him, yes, and probably effortlessly and painlessly. But Sasori wouldn't be aware of what he was taking out of the world. Which was why Deidara had to do this. Even if it killed him, he'd finish this mission.

Sasori woke up at about three. He woke up because something was off. There was the unmistakable tang of blood in the air. (Mind you, he couldn't actually *smell* it, but it was like chakra; shinobi just learned to sense these kinds of things.) He yawned, wishing that he actually *had* to when he did, and stood up with a stretch. He was in no hurry; he already knew what had happened.

Sasori made his way into the kitchen, noting the way that one of the largest chakra feathers was missing. He had *told* Sukeru to take care of it... Didn't matter anymore.

The door to Takamaru's room was ajar. Sasori nudged it open with one foot, narrowing his eyes. There wasn't as much blood as what he'd expected. Overall, it was actually a pretty clean kill.

Takamaru lay in his bed, one arm laid on his stomach, the other dangling off of the edge. His navy eyes were wide open and staring up at the ceiling. He wasn't grinning, but he was smiling. It actually looked like a gentle smile, too. Sasori sighed; Takamaru had known all along, then...

The feather was buried in his chest, directly over his heart. There wasn't that much blood, and what was there was absorbed by his shirt. Sasori tugged the feather free of the body, wiping the blood off on his uniform. After all of that... Takamaru had survived quite a lot. Just to be killed by his own adopted son, by his own chakra. Poor man.

Sasori walked around the bed and found Deidara propped up against the edge. He tilted his head to the side to try to see him, as he didn't want to get any closer just yet. The blonde's knees were drawn up to his chest, his arms were set on his knees, and his head was hidden by that. "Deidara?" Sasori tried.

"He knew all along. He knew all along I was going to kill him, Sasori-danna," came the listless reply. Sasori walked over and knelt beside him, unable to feel any pity or sympathy for his partner. It was over with; there was nothing to lament. "He didn't know it was because of the Jashinist thing... It was the last thing we said to each other. He said he'd kill me if I didn't have an Akatsuki uniform. I said I'd kill him... I didn't put any specifications on it, yeah..."

"You're a lot stronger than I thought you were, Deidara."

"Is Sukeru going to die as well?"

"You let me take care of that." Sasori paused, and then said gently, "I'm not going to hold another funeral, but you can bury him if you'd like."

"Takamaru never liked the ground," Deidara replied. He finally raised his head, setting his chin on his folded arms. Sasori noticed that he had been crying, earlier, but now he just looked tired.

"Alright then," he said with a nod.

"Can we just go home now?"

"That sounds like a good idea to me."

--.-

Hidan was quite perplexed when the two artists and their Hyuuga pets returned from their mission. He had expected Deidara to torment him with the fact that *he* got to kill the other Jashinist, but he didn't get any teasing at all. In fact, Deidara just approached him, threw a necklace at him, and then stalked off with a, "There, you arrogant, conceited, self-centered bitch. I hope you're happy now."

Hidan caught the necklace, unable to come up with a reply before Deidara disappeared. He looked down at the chain. It had Jashin's symbol on it, so he assumed that the mission was a success. Maybe the blonde was just moody because he got hurt or something. "Yeah," Hidan replied to the air, holding the necklace up against the sun. It was made of something white and dull, but it still looked cool. "Yeah, I guess I'm pretty damn happy with myself."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Konan decides that the Akatsuki is too rough of a place to raise a child. But what does she do? Piss off the rest of the organization and put Pein in a very hard place! Eventually, their rancor dissolves, but Konan is left wondering a lot about the child-to-be. For example, she hadn't even thought of a name...

How To Be A Midwife

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You need to stop swearing," Konan announced one evening. Pein, who had almost been asleep, grumbled something incoherent and rolled over. The pregnant woman propped herself up on one elbow, shaking his shoulder. "I'm serious, Pein. You need to stop swearing. The child won't need to grow up swearing so much."

"Don't talk to *me*, then, talk to Hidan and Kakuzu..." a half-asleep leader replied into the pillow. Konan let go of him, thinking about the other members for the first time in regards to her child.

-.-.-

The next morning, at an unbearably early hour in which only Konan and Sasori seemed completely awake, the blunette started laying out the ground rules. "No swearing, under any circumstances. Which means, Hidan, you basically don't talk. Ever. And try not to get any blood around the kid. He or she will become a ninja in due time, and no need to let it grow up violently. Oh, and just no violence. I'm talking to *you*, Kakuzu; no more beating on Hidan until the kid is at least chuunin rank."

Most of the men were too tired to even comprehend what she was saying. In fact, as if prompted by that, Deidara dropped onto the ground with a loud snore. Unfortunately, he landed on his arm which had been 'kind of' broken, and jumped back up with a yelp that woke most of the others.

"Nngh? Wha?" Kisame looked around, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "You say somethin', Deidara...?"

"I didn't..." Deidara replied, cradling his sore arm.

"What's going on?" Tobi asked suddenly, jerking out of his own doze.

"I dunno what the hell this is, I thought we were supposed to be listening to some shit or something..." Hidan replied with a yawn.

Sasori presently stepped away from them all, as they suddenly had targets painted on their foreheads.

After Konan was done waking them all up—with a horrifying mixture of paper, shouting and fists—she straightened her (really, it was Pein's) uniform and cleared her throat. "As I was *saying*," she said primly, "We're going to instigate some rules for the child's sake."

"Like what?" Kakuzu asked warily, rubbing his shoulder from where she nearly severed it with a paper sword.

"No swearing, no blood, no violence, nothing inappropriate."

The silence was deafening. Itachi just coughed, and then reached up to plug his ears. The rest of the members promptly exploded then.

"What are you *talking* about?!"

"Why the fuck would we do that?!"

"I'll swear and kill as much as I damn please, woman!"

"Why are you just thinking about this *now*?!"

"We still have two months! Why *now*?"

"*You're* the one having the kid, you can't impose these rules on *us*, yeah!"

Konan put a hand up, which silenced all of them immediately. She rested her other hand on her stomach, and then glared at them all from under her hair. "This child is going to have a difficult enough life without having to deal with swearing, violent, idiotic serial killers on a daily basis. You are all going to be *good* role models, or so help me, you'll wish you never joined this group."

Most of the complaints stopped then and there.

But it didn't mean that the rest of the members were whispering mutiny. None of them were pleased about the sudden rules imposed on them, especially, as she pointed out, they *were* serial killers. Missing-nin. They were supposed to be free of rules, weren't they? Hidan and Kakuzu appeared to be the hardest hit pair. Hidan had basically given up all speaking, and only answered with nods or shakes of his head. Kakuzu was visibly restraining himself each and every day from killing something from frustration.

Suddenly, Pein became quite popular. Mostly for entreaties to stop the madness, but as the week dragged on, the members realized the futility of this. Instead, they started asking for missions.

The Akatsuki members threw themselves at each and every mission he would even *mention*, with a fervor that was frightening. Most of them were quite mundane, jounin- or even chuunin-leveled missions, but they begged for them all the same. Pein was amused by this at first, but soon that amusement morphed into shock, and then finally exasperation. He ran out of missions, after all. He was busy working on his Bijuu jutsu, as it was affectionately nicknamed, and he could only keep track of so many missions. He soon appointed Kakuzu as the man in charge of them, just to get everyone out of his hair.

Unfortunately, this turned out to be a disaster. Within the first week, it was apparent that Kakuzu was keeping most of the missions for himself (and occasionally Hidan). The rest of the members revolted, practically tearing down Pein's door in a demand for justice.

Eventually, Sasori and Itachi calmed everyone down enough to suggest that they talk this out like civilized shinobi. Pein called an official meeting, even going as far as to hold it in the old Bijuu sealing chamber. At least in the darkness it'd be easier to catch jutsu, if need be.

"This is all Konan's fault!" was the first thing said at the meeting. This set the pregnant woman off, and Pein had to physically restrict her.

"Settle down, settle down!" he shouted, pushing her back to the ground. He made sure everyone else was sitting, and then sat down himself. "We need to reach a compromise here."

"Pein, do you want *your child* to grow up as roughly as we did?" Konan said at once, turning to him. He faltered, and the other members knew that they were already losing this battle.

"Hardship builds character!" Kakuzu shouted, crossing his arms. "It never hurt anyone. Look how

we turned out."

Konan regarded him flatly.

"Let's look at it this way," Zetsu's white side spoke up, soothingly. "Instead of being hurt by outside sources, your child will have the entire Akatsuki to protect it. Who cares if we're all a little... ah, rough around the edges? He or she will learn all these things anyway when he or she enters into the academy."

She turned to him, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "I had planned on teaching it myself. I'm much more experienced and skilled than any old teacher."

"Fine, fine." Zetsu put his hands up in surrender, and looked around pleadingly for someone else to take over.

"Eh, Zetsu's right," Kisame said at once, jumping to his rescue. "What if you're looking at this the wrong way, Konan-san?"

"What do you mean?" she asked simply.

"See, in Kiri, we had that old death match thing in the academy." Kisame jumped at the way her expression hardened, and hastened to amend, "I-I don't mean we do that! No, no! I just meant, a little toughness never hurt anyone. If you introduce the kid to such things at an early age, it's actually better..."

"War at a young age has a profound effect on children," Itachi said, calm as ever. "Kisame is right. It is not a bad thing if introduced properly and carefully."

"But the swearing..." Konan started.

"Swearing will happen. You can't shelter your child forever. That'll just spoil it and make things worse," Sasori pointed out, waving his hand in the air. "It'll be better to raise it properly rather than gently."

The blunette woman looked down at her belly, absently running her fingers lightly over it. "I can see your point... but..."

"Konan-san, you can't change the group just like that!" Tobi said emphatically. "We're all people here, and we all have our own habits and opinions. Your opinion is that your baby will be perfect. Hidan-san's is that you should just have an—" The masked ninja was quickly shut up by said immortal. Konan glared at him, but Hidan just grinned sheepishly at her.

"Yeah, yeah, what he said. You can't just *do* shit like this."

"But anyway," Kakuzu said before Konan could say anything about Hidan's swearing, "It's not going to hurt the kid, swearing and the like."

She didn't reply, and instead just looked down at her stomach again.

-.-.-

The group relaxed much more once all of the rules were lifted. The need for missions gradually

declined as well, which meant the mass of Amegakure got them once more. Pein got to work on his Bijuu jutsu, and Konan started trying to act more like a mother.

To help her with this, she had Deidara invited Hinata over to the tower more often. "Without Kabuto here, you're going to have to be the midwife," Konan informed her. The chuunin girl just stared at her in disbelief.

"I-I know nothing about—"

"That's why we're going over this now. You're going to learn."

The results were disastrous. More often than not, once Konan got into the details of the actual birthing process, Hinata would either faint or start hyperventilating. After another week of this, the pregnant Akatsuki member gave up on that and just made Madara fill the role of midwife. (He was not pleased with this, but even he was afraid of her when she was angry these days. Pregnant kunoichi were *scary*.) Hinata happily gave up the role, and instead volunteered eagerly for babysitting duty. Konan decided to allow her at least that; she was good with children, once they were actually out of the womb.

"Hmm... Need a name..." Konan said one day, while Hinata was still in earshot. The younger girl perked up.

"You haven't thought of a name yet?" she asked. Konan turned to her with a blink; she hadn't known that she was still here.

"No... not seriously, anyway. I haven't talked to Pein about it, either," she confessed. "At first, he seemed excited about the prospect of a child, and now he just seems skittish." When Hinata didn't reply right away, Konan looked at her. She was very obviously trying to picture the leader of the Akatsuki as 'skittish'. Konan smiled wryly at the picture it created, and then turned back to her lap. "I have a feeling I'm going to be the one raising the child for awhile. Until Pein figures out that jutsu of his..."

"I'm sure he'll have it done soon," Hinata said comfortingly. "...Konan-senpai?"

"Hm?"

"Would you rather it be a boy or a girl?" she asked shyly.

Konan thought about that for a moment before replying. "...I don't know. I haven't given *that* much thought, either. I just figured it would be a given that I would be happy with a son or a daughter."

"I-I didn't mean it that way!" Hinata said quickly, shaking her head. "I just... It's not that you won't be happy, but don't you just dream of a little girl, or a little boy? When you think of the baby, do you picture it as male or female?"

"Hmm..." Konan closed her eyes, and tried to picture herself five years from then. She, Pein, and a child. Was it a little boy, or a girl...? "I think... I don't know. I'd be happy with either. If it is a girl, then I will put her hair in braids and dress her in kimonos and teach her how to hide senbon in the sleeves. If it is a boy, then I will still dress him in formal clothes, but I'll teach him how to make my origami weapons and how to use them. I'm not partial to either one over the other."

"What about Pein-sama? Is he hoping for one or the other?"

"I haven't asked him about it," Konan replied dryly. She realized that she and Pein had a lot to

discuss, apparently. Or at least think about.

"Then how are you going to think of names?" Hinata asked in confusion.

"Make a list of both male and female, and pick when the time comes?" That was what she had been planning on, anyway... "I... I'll talk to Pein about it later."

"Okay," Hinata said with a smile as she left. Konan was alone with her thoughts.

Do I want a boy or a girl? she asked herself. It was slightly scary that she hadn't thought about this until now. *What would Pein want?* She could imagine him with a son very easily. But what if he secretly wanted a daughter? Konan stood up and dusted the back of her uniform off, and set off to find her partner.

He was, predictably, holed up in his room still trying to work on the Bijuu jutsu. He didn't glance up as she entered, nor did he move when she stood behind him and cleared her throat. Konan was fed up when she couldn't elicit a reaction, and eventually just grabbed him by the back of the collar and yanked. Pein fell back, chair and all, and hit the ground with a loud thump. The ginger-haired man just glared up at her, before demanding flatly, "What."

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" Konan asked, crossing her arms. It was getting more and more awkward to do, what with her expanding belly and everything. But she still managed it when she was annoyed.

Pein got to his feet, pulling his chair up behind him. "Why are you asking? I don't see how it matters anymore. It's not like wishing will change what it is—"

"*Pein.*"

"I don't know," he sighed, glancing at her with a ringed eye. "Why do we have to talk of this now? I was so close to a breakthrough—"

"It will still be there when we are done with this conversation," Konan said impassively, tapping her sandal against the wooden floor. Pein rolled his eyes, and then pushed his chair in under the desk.

"Fine. We'll do this *your* way. What else do you want to say?"

"Let's go somewhere to talk. I don't want to just stand here in your office." He had learned that it was easier to just follow her whims when she got like this, and just went to his closet to pull on another uniform. Konan grabbed his arm and pulling him back towards the door, pouting. "You don't have to wear your uniform all the time... I like seeing you without it."

"Huh, the Akatsuki leader not wearing his Akatsuki uniform." Pein regarded her, but eventually gave in. He was pulled out into the streets of Amegakure in nothing more than some pants and an old shirt. He was lucky to have gotten the time to kick on some sandals. "Konan, why are we doing this?"

"It's half of your DNA, you know. You could put forth some effort," she retorted with a sniff, linking her arm with his. "We haven't talked at all about this. That's why. Oh, and I decided that Madara is going to have to be the midwife."

Pein snorted, unable to believe what he'd just heard. "*What?!*"

"It's him or Itachi, and I'd rather have Madara. He's the only one who'll do, what with Kabuto gone."

Hinata just kept fainting on me..."

"But—why Madara?"

"The Sharingan. I'll just give him a book about it beforehand and we'll be set," she said with a proud smile. Pein was just glad that he wasn't the only one getting roped into this. "Okay, now—oh, let's go in here." She pulled him suddenly into a homey little teashop, looking around with the same proud smile. "Over there, in the corner."

She waved away a skittish waitress before she could take their orders, so they were left relatively alone. Pein was glad for the small miracle. He felt bad enough without his uniform...

"Boy or girl?" Konan asked, putting her chin in her hands and her elbows on the table. Pein just shrugged. Her eyes hardened, and she repeated, "Pein. Boy or girl?"

"I don't particularly care. A kid is a kid," he mumbled sourly, not believing he was caught like this. No uniform, out in the middle of Ame, talking about baby things of all things... He should be back in his office, working on that jutsu! He was so close to finishing it, too...

Her glare was all the answer he'd need.

"Uh, I don't know. I suppose... a little girl would be nice if you want us to have a normal family and everything," he said quickly, looking anywhere but at her at this point.

Konan nodded thoughtfully. "We also need to think of some names."

Pein dearly wished he could have just asked "I just answered your question, why do we need to raise more?!", but somehow, he just didn't possess the courage. So instead, he made a noncommittal noise and looked outside the window.

"Do you have any names you like?" Konan asked sweetly. Pein swallowed audibly, still staring hard out the window.

"No." Good. Short answers and she couldn't trap him.

"None at *all*?" she asked, still sweet as sugar.

"Not really."

"Are you honestly going to keep that up?" she asked, finally dropping the honey in her voice.

"Pein, you wanted this thing, so you are going to have to pretend like you care what's happening to it."

Pein's head snapped around to stare at her incredulously. "Konan, I *do* care what's happening. What would you call all of *this*?!" He spread one hand, scowling. "I'm trying to make a goddamn jutsu for our child. I'm trying to get rid of war and fighting and make a better life than what we had."

She smiled indulgently, tilting her head to one side. "Good to see you're so excited about this. Now give me a name."

"I-Itachi."

"One that *isn't* taken by someone we know."

"..." Of course, put on the spot like that, he couldn't come up with one. Pein was talented in many things, but coming up with baby names was not one of those things. Especially under pressure. "...

Haku." Good. Simple name.

Konan pursed her lips, thinking. "...Haku. I think I like it... But what if it's a girl?"

"Mei? Naiya?"

"Naiya? Sounds foreign."

"I don't know, I made it up," Pein admitted with a shrug. Now he was getting the hang of it, at least... "Why aren't you thinking of any names?" He couldn't keep the tiny note of accusation out of his voice, but he had never liked getting cornered like this.

"I can't," she said blandly. "I've thought of one or two, but I'm not sure I like them."

"Well, what are they? Like you said, I have a say in this as well..."

"Hm." She frowned momentarily at him, but then averted her eyes and smiled vapidly. "For a girl, Chihiro. Though I've heard the name Kurenai somewhere before, and I think it's rather pretty."

"And any male names?" Pein prompted.

"Only one, really. Seishirou. Because then we could call him Sei-chan, and I've always liked longer names."

-.-.-

Madara was only slightly surprised when he was given a large stack of baby books by Pein and ordered to memorize them. He was half tempted to refuse—because after all, since when did *Pein* give the orders?—but then he thought better of it. It might be handy to have an influence on the child, when it came.

Though he still didn't fancy being the midwife.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Pein is having difficulties with his Bijuu jutsu, and demands help from his Akatsuki. They, however, are less than keen on helping him so easily. So Deidara decides to get out of Ame-with a picnic, of all things! Cliches, ninja tag, and one ill-timed thunderstorm, all in the next chapter of Dark Knight!

Partnership

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

No new missions were assigned for Akatsuki members.

Mostly because Pein demanded concentration from them. He needed ideas, badly, and help figuring out a bit of the structure behind the jutsu. He asked each member in turn for their take on it, and soon found out that Kakuzu was a great help. Probably from the knowledge of dozens of decades of life and his horde of jutsu.

Over the next few weeks, he would snag Kakuzu out of whatever he was doing and drag him off to his office (nicknamed the lair by most of the other members) and generally completely throw off his schedule. Occasionally he'd snare another member, asking about a specific part of the jutsu or their techniques, but mostly it was Kakuzu. This irritated Hidan to no end.

"Who the hell does he think he is, Jashin-sama?! He can't just kidnap my sparring partner every time he damn pleases to go do who the hell knows what!"

"Sparring partner? Is that what it's called, what you two have?" Zetsu asked dryly, his black half snickering. Hidan then spent the next few hours playing 'hide and seek' with him with his scythe.

"He does have a point. Leader-sama is getting quite... unpredictable with this," Sasori said. He and Deidara were watching bits and pieces of this episode, mildly amused. Pein had already caught Deidara twice for his knowledge of explosives and Sasori once for his knowledge of sealing.

"Want to ditch town for the weekend?" Deidara asked, playing with a miniature Karura on his bed. Or rather, Sasori's bed; he was still living in his room, due to his own filled with sculptures. Sasori turned to him from mixing ingredients for a new poison, one of the leaves of a plant stuck in his mouth for holding. Deidara snorted at this, until Sasori threw the plant at him and it landed in his mouth.

"It won't kill you, but it'll numb your mouth for about an hour. Silence is golden," Sasori said as he turned back to his work with an evil smirk. Deidara gave him the finger and threw the plant back at him, but the puppeteer just caught it and set it back harmlessly on his desk. "We'll continue this conversation when you can speak properly again. By then I should be done with this mixture."

An hour later, Deidara was not speaking to Sasori purely to spite him. It didn't work, though, since the Suna-nin was too busy completing his poison to notice. Deidara cleared his throat, but his partner still didn't look up. "...I had asked you a question, Sasori-danna."

"And I'll ask a simple 'why' in reply," he replied without looking up.

"Because Leader-sama is getting annoying with his surprise visits, yeah? Plus I haven't seen the countryside since the trees started growing back."

"They're baby trees. You can see them anywhere."

Deidara rolled over, groaning. "You're impossible, yeah. I'll go ask Bya-chan to assist me, then."

"She's with Itachi. He seems bent on making her as proficient at genjutsu as he is," Sasori said, shooting down his dreams. "Everyone is *busy*, Deidara. Why don't you try it?"

"I don't want to be busy, though." He sighed, and twirled his finger in the air. The miniature Karura twirled as well, its tiny uniform flaring out at the knees. "That's so boring. There's nothing to do now that all the other villages are terrified of us, yeah..."

"Well then, plan out your life once we're ruling the world."

"That'll be boring, too. I want another war, yeah. Or a picnic."

"...There is a vast difference between those two things. What makes you want them?" Sasori finally paused in his work, peering at Deidara out of the corner of his eye.

"A war would be interesting because it seems fighting is the only interesting thing to do anymore. And a picnic because I'm hungry, yeah. And it'd involve me getting out of the village for at least a few hours. Want to go on a picnic, Sasori-danna?"

"I don't eat." And with that, Sasori's curiosity was gone, and he returned to his work.

"Why are you so boring?" Deidara deadpanned. "All you ever do is work."

"It's all there is *to* do. Apart from getting jumped by Leader-sama."

"There's a picnic."

"No, Deidara. *No*."

"We're running out of genjutsu you are able to learn," Itachi said to himself, frowning slightly. Hinata perked up, pathetically hopeful at those words. "Unless you're willing to find out if a non-Uchiha can learn the *Tsukuyomi*."

She paled. "N-No thanks."

"There is one, that I actually learned from Hidan..."

There was a knock on the door, interrupting them. Hinata bowed towards Itachi, and then scampered off to answer it. Itachi turned to see the familiar blonde let himself into the room, Sasori staying idly in the doorway. He narrowed his eyes slightly; he would get no more work done with Hinata today if they were here to take her away. And he was making such progress...

"You learned a genjutsu technique from Hidan?" Hinata asked over her shoulder, unable to contain her curiosity. Deidara, however, suddenly tensed, and Itachi raised an eyebrow a fraction when he noticed this.

"Yes. It's called the *Chimatsuri* jutsu, and it could almost be called a ninjutsu for the effect it has on the target. And while it's highly useful for Hidan and his techniques, it can also be used with favorable results in most battles—"

"You're not learning that, yeah," Deidara interrupted. He had gone nearly as pale as Hinata, and he was staring at Itachi. "She's not learning that, Uchiha."

"Just because it was used on you?" Itachi asked politely.

Sasori and Hinata both looked at Deidara in surprise. The black-haired shinobi smiled mentally; it looks like his guess was right. So Hidan had used it on Deidara, presumably to go against Pein's orders... interesting. But it was so long ago, it had little consequence now.

"It's a horrible jutsu, yeah," Deidara replied with a scowl. "It's not fit for Bya-chan."

"Any jutsu is fit for any person. The unpredictability of it is a great asset in battle. If a kunoichi like Hinata-san used it, it would be a surprise who whoever the enemy was."

"She's not learning it, Uchiha. End of story, yeah. I've put up with you—"

"Please stop fighting." A soft voice interrupted their argument, and both men turned to Hinata. She turned pink, and hastily looked down at her toes. "I-I'll learn the genjutsu if Itachi-senpai wants me to. It's not like... It's not like I'll use it all the time, Deidara-kun... It's handy to know jutsus that people wouldn't expect you to know..."

"If Hinata herself doesn't wish to learn the genjutsu, then I won't teach it to her. But you, Deidara, should have no say in her education."

"I'm sorry to have interrupted this lesson, but Deidara had come here to ask Hinata-hime a question," Sasori said, a bit louder than necessary. Hinata looked relieved at the disruption. "It seems as if *someone* had the bright idea to go on a picnic, and he insists on taking her along."

Hinata turned to Itachi with shining white eyes, hands clasped together. He waved her off, murmuring, "Go, if you like."

She bowed to him in thanks, and skipped out the door with Deidara and Sasori. Sasori, though, lingered in the doorway, and then said in parting, "Don't mind Deidara. You know how he feels about her."

"Indeed I do," Itachi said with a small smile. Sasori shared in this mysterious smile for a moment, and then turned and left him. So suddenly the Uchiha was left with a free afternoon. He looked about him for a moment, and then decided to go try to find Kisame.

-.-.-

They found a sunny little hill far from the city, where the grasses were waist-high and the trees surrounded them like a sea. Far off, they could see a few of the many lakes of Amegakure, but here, here it seemed normal. Sasori, who had sworn that he'd never fly again after the Iwa mission, was the first back on the ground.

"Oh, it's not that bad," Hinata said with a smile, sliding off as it landed properly.

"Speak for yourself." Sasori kept well away from the bird, eyeing it like he'd watch an enemy shinobi. "From the Land of Wind or not, I was not designed for flying. No shinobi really is."

"Except for Deidara-kun." Hinata giggled, gesturing as Deidara jumped down grandly from his bird. "He's as much of a bird as his clay."

"Unfortunately, yes," Sasori conceded.

Hinata spread the blanket on the grass, smoothing out the corners before she sat on it. She beamed up at the two of them, as sunny as her name. She seemed more excited than Deidara about the prospect of a picnic.

They soon discovered that it was much more fun just to lay in the grass, and stare at the beauty of the nature around them. It was a warm summer day, thankfully, and not a cloud in the sky. They had luckily picked one of the rare non-rainy days. Of course, it didn't mean it wouldn't rain later, but at least they had their moment now.

"And that one, that's some type of sparrow. I can't tell from here, yeah," Deidara said as he pointed to a tiny bird in one of the nearest trees. Hinata nodded, practically awestruck. Sasori rolled his eyes, watching with morbid amusement as a small falcon swooped down and captured the sparrow for its lunch.

"What's wrong, Sasori?" Hinata asked, almost looking genuinely concerned.

"I'm not exactly as enthralled as my partner when it comes to birds. Do excuse me for this." He wished he had brought a book. Or something to do, if the other two were just going to sit there and bird watch.

"So if we start pointing out trees you'll name them for us?" Deidara asked. Sasori gave him a glare that could peel pain, and Deidara just snickered and ducked his head. "Okay, I tried, sorry, yeah..."

"I thought you two were going to actually have a picnic, not play nature."

"You know what would be fun?" Deidara asked without giving a hint that he'd heard Sasori. "Playing hide and seek out here, yeah."

"Hinata-hime has the Byakugan. It wouldn't be a very long game."

"No, we wouldn't play with anything like that," Hinata protested. "No Byakugan, I promise."

"Count me out." Sasori returned to basking in the sunlight like a contented cat. Deidara got up, delicately dusted himself off, and then stomped over to haul Sasori upright by the back of the uniform. "Hey!"

"It's no fun with just two people. You're playing, Sasori-danna. I'll even be it first, yeah," Deidara told him matter-of-factly. He sent the other two off while returning to the bird, counting out loud. He didn't even peek.

He caught Sasori first, because his hair was just too bright. Deidara ruffled it when he caught him, grinning. "What."

"You stick out like a sore thumb, Sasori-danna."

"I'm sorry for my red hair. I'll dye it when we get back."

"No! I like it, yeah. It's just really easy to find."

"And navy hair isn't?"

"Umm... no."

"Whatever. I'll just take my turn as it now. And keep in mind that you have bright blonde hair, Deidara."

After a sparse few rounds, the game quickly degraded into nothing more than tag. And even that soon disintegrated into shinobi-style tag; meaning, they were jumping from tree to tree, hanging upside down, hiding with all of the tricks they could manage, and even using the occasional *Shunshin* or *Kawarimi* to dodge tags. And even Sasori, who couldn't use the latter two, figured out how to keep them away. He merely held whoever had the great misfortune of being it at the time upside-down by the ankle with the metal cord from his stomach, saying, "You can't tag me."

They still hadn't eaten the actual picnic by the time it was cut short. Clouds had rolled in, and a distant rumble of thunder was their only warning before the heavens opened up and the downpour started. Laughing and running, Hinata made it to the relative shelter of the bird first, ducking under its wing in a vain attempt to stay dry.

Deidara, who had been it and was hanging upside down by the ankle by Sasori, was dropped unceremoniously into the wet leaves below him. He sat up, rubbing his back, blinking when he saw a hand extended to help him up. "Hurry up, you're already probably going to catch a cold," Sasori said simply. Deidara took his hand and pulled himself to his feet, brushing the wet leaves and grass off of his backside.

"Aww, and is Sasori-danna worried about me? Last time I checked, I've gotten colds before, yeah," Deidara said, pausing to retie his hair. It had fallen out while hanging upside down.

"Yes, and I remember how insufferable you were during it."

"Can't you at least let me pretend you are actually worried for my wellbeing, yeah?"

"No. I enjoy disillusioning you about the world at large. It's actually a hobby of mine."

"You do such a good job at it."

Thunder clapped overhead, just a second after lightning lit up the entire forest for a brief moment. As the harsh lighting was fading, Deidara realized just how close he and Sasori were standing. And, belatedly, that they were under a tree. "Aren't we going to get zapped, yeah?"

"This isn't the tallest tree around, idiot."

"Either way, I'd feel safer elsewhere."

"Out in the open where *you* are the tallest object?" Sasori asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Or like under the bird with Bya-chan, yeah," Deidara responded, wringing out his ponytail. "We're getting soaked, even under the damn tree..."

"I hadn't noticed," Sasori remarked dryly. His partner laughed and ruffled his wet hair, much to his annoyance. "Since when did you pick up that habit?"

"When I figured out how much fun it was."

"Then why would you do such a thing?"

"You look like a cute little kid when you're angry, yeah."

"You like humanizing me, don't you?" Sasori accused, glaring up at him.

"Probably." Deidara just grinned. Lightning again forked across the sky, and the blonde jumped slightly at the sudden thunder. It was a lot closer this time.

Sasori chuckled at his expense. "Scared of the storm, Deidara?"

"No, just bad memories of having to fly through them. Like what we're going to have to do if you want to get home, yeah."

The redhead would have paled if he could have. "Mm, no thanks, I'd rather stay in one piece and *not* struck by lighting. I'm sure we can wait out the storm..."

The two waited in the sparse protection of the tree, Deidara almost clinging to Sasori for warmth. It was a cold rain, true, but the blonde couldn't blame it all on that. (Nevermind the fact that Sasori *had* no warmth.) "Sasori-danna?"

"Yes?"

"If we don't make it out of here—"

"Oh, don't start that stupidity. It's a thunderstorm, Deidara."

"—then I want you to know—"

"Thunderstorm. Just that. We have them in Ame all the time."

"—that I really don't hate you, yeah."

Sasori suddenly quieted, looking out at the dripping forest. "I know that," he said finally.

"I'm sure Bya-chan doesn't either," Deidara chirped.

The redhead sighed, leaning against the trunk of the tree they were sheltering under. "You really know how to ruin my mood, Deidara."

"I did that on purpose. I like seeing you disappointed like that, yeah. Plus I don't like getting your hopes too high."

"So you only get them high and shoot them down yourself?"

"There's nothing else to do around here."

"I can think of three things off the top of my head," Sasori said idly, drumming his fingers on his arm.

"I can too, but even I have standards, yeah," he said, pushing out his chest with a noble air. Sasori snorted. "What? I do..."

"Yeah, too bad they're pretty low." Deidara gave him a flat look, so Sasori elaborated. He held up his hand at chest level, and said, "See? This is the normal person's standards." Then he lifted his foot a centimeter or two off of the forest floor. "And that, down there, is your standards. See the difference?"

"Why do I have such low standards?"

"Because of your art."

"Then your standards much be subterranean, yeah, because your art sucks."

"Oh, *how* witty, Deidara."

"Well it does." For good measure, he stuck his tongue out.

"Your genius astounds me, it really does."

"Oh, shut up."

The pair lapsed into silence, both of them having run out of arguments. It was Deidara who gave in, just because he wanted to hear something other than the repetitive sound of the rain falling on the leaves above them. "...Why are you trying to desensitize yourself to me?"

Sasori sighed, biting his bottom lip. "Because this isn't going anywhere, it's unhealthy for a shinobi of my stature, because it's easier to ignore you than to try to get your attention? Take your pick, I don't care which."

"I personally like the second one, yeah. Because the first and third aren't true."

Sasori turned and looked at Deidara warily. Deidara gazed back at him, blinking innocently. "You like doing this, don't you?"

"To some degree. I don't care enough to learn how to get under other members' skin, yeah."

"I'm flattered," Sasori said sarcastically.

"But it is true. Mostly. Kind of. Slightly, yeah."

The redhead narrowed his eyes. "Just shut up and kiss me."

"How original of you."

"I'm an artist. My originality is poured into my art."

"And kissing in the rain, yeah? Cliché."

"It's hard enough talking to you any other time, let alone trying to corner you like this." Sasori just pulled Deidara down by the front of the uniform, pressing his lips against the blonde's.

-.-.-

Eventually, the storm subsided. Hinata had been a bit worried when neither Deidara or Sasori showed up, but as the rain gradually slowed to a light mist, the two appeared from the forest. She noticed with a smile that Deidara was pulling Sasori up the hill. Shaking her head, she just thought, *those two. Sometimes I wonder if they really dislike each other as much as they pretend...*

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Well, well, well. It seems as if those two have finally gotten past most of their differences, but instead of this being a good thing, somehow it manages to make Deidara depressed. Since when is twenty-two old, though? He and Sasori make a bet on an oddly timed tournament, just for kicks, too. Because it's all just harmless

fun, right...?

Midlife Crisis Part I

Chapter Notes

Note: This chapter is filled with much speculation. Though I have done my research and I should have most of it down. Sasori's saying Kakashi is over thirty was a mistake on his part; I am well aware he would only be twenty-nine (at the time of his death) in Dark Knight. And, since you will be asking by the end of the chapter, I will answer it now: No, I am not under the influence of any drugs or alcohol.

((2022 crosspost note: do you ever get scared of your past self))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Let's go on a date, yeah."

"What would possess you to ask me that?"

"I don't know. All we ever do together is missions, yeah."

"That's how ninja are supposed to act."

"So that's a no?"

"Yes, it's a no."

"Fine then, I'm asking Bya-chan."

"Go for it. I'll be in the library if you need me, heaven forbid."

Deidara was more than a little peeved when he was turned down and had to try to track down Hinata. Not that he minded her, oh no! And now that he actually put some thought into it, he realized that they hadn't had any time alone together since her birthday... Sasori could go screw himself for all he cared. Deidara was going to take Hinata out on a date, then. (Even if Neji killed him for it.)

He tried her room at the tower first, with no hope of actually finding her there. She had long since moved out, unless she was summoned to the tower for some reason. Deidara sighed and rolled his eyes, marching to the nearest window to depart from. Neji's apartment was across town, too, and of *course* it was still raining. With lightning, so he'd have to *walk*.

The artist felt very normal and un-artist-like as he trekked through the village, ducking his head so the top of his collar and the bottom of his hat nearly met. At least now he knew that the hats were for, really. People stopped and stared as he passed. For living in Amegakure, they should be used to Akatsuki members just walking around. Deidara frowned, and hurried on faster through the rain, trying to ignore the stares. They were probably trying to figure out which member would be stupid enough to come out into the storm like that...

At least it was a warm rain.

By the time he was knocking on their door, he was soaked from the shoulders down. A harried

Hinata opened the door, breaking out into a grin when she saw who it was. "Deidara-kun!"

"Hi, Bya-chan," he replied with a grin.

"Who is it, who is it?" She was forced to step aside when Kisho wiggled out to the doorstep. Deidara looked down at the cat, willing his hat to drip on him. "Oh, it's just him."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean, yeah?"

"Oh, nothing. Just the fact that I hadn't expected you," Kisho replied simply, curling his tail around his paws.

"I don't see why you don't get rid of the cat, yeah," Deidara said flatly, returning his gaze back to Hinata.

She giggled softly, waving off the suggestion. "Kisho is a good cat, even if he's a little angry sometimes. Plus now I can hold actual conversations with him."

"Yeah, you should have heard her *before* she knew I could talk. She'd still talk to me! Like I was her diary or something—nnnrl!" He was shoved aside with a yowl by her foot, and Hinata giggled again, nervously.

"W-Won't you come in? You're sopping wet, poor thing..."

"Just wondering if you'd like to spend the day with me, yeah. We haven't hung out in ages, just the two of us." Deidara stood out under the eave, complacently dripping onto the ground below. Hinata bit her lip, looking down. His heart sank because he knew the answer before she opened her mouth to speak.

"I-I'd *love* to, you know I would... B-But niisan's birthday is tomorrow, and I'm trying to bake a cake for him..."

"Trying to?"

"I'm... not the best cook around. And *someone* keeps sabotaging me..." She looked down at the cat pointedly.

"What? Who wants chocolate when I'm willing to give up a perfectly good rat?" Kisho asked, laying his ears back against his head.

"He's turning sixteen then?" Deidara asked. He hadn't expected her to be older than him.

"No, seventeen," she corrected, looking up from the feline. Well, that would explain why he hadn't expected her to be older than him; she wasn't. The blonde sheepishly rubbed his head, feeling rather silly and *old*. He had six years on her, then...

"Some other time, then, yeah..." he said with a small smile, ducking his head.

"Oh... yeah... I'm sorry, but some other time, Deidara-kun," she said, returning the minute smile.

-.-.-

Deidara thought it was slightly amusing how he was the second youngest Akatsuki member, and was suddenly having a midlife crisis. He was six years older than Hinata, so what? It didn't mean they couldn't still be friends. (And true, he felt a bit jealous that she was baking a cake for Neji's birthday; he hadn't gotten one! But that was his own fault, as he never told her his birth date.) It didn't change anything.

Except for the fact that he felt *old*. Hinata acted like an old mother, yes, but she was still physically the epitome of a sixteen-year-old girl. Neji was seventeen now. Sasori, sure, he was probably older than him, but he *looked* younger than any of them.

Hidan, too, had a problem with aging. He looked as young as Deidara, but he was (supposedly) over two hundred. Kakuzu, though not exactly jailbait, was still centuries younger than what he actually was. The Akatsuki as a whole was a very young group. True, they've already changed the world several times over, but they were still juvenile. Juvenile delinquents, more like.

In five years, where would they all be? In ten, would they still be the Akatsuki, most feared in all the land? In twenty, would they still be the strongest shinobi alive?

Who would be the first to die?

Sasori had come close, once. Deidara himself had nearly died on the last mission. Who else had close calls like that? Kisame had, in that Konoha war... Were they already losing their touch? So who would be the first to really kick the bucket, Orochimaru aside? Would it be like Orochimaru's demise, being replaced by a newer, better model? Or would the Akatsuki slowly disband and disintegrate as the members were picked off, one by one? Whether it be from fighting or age...

But who could really match the Akatsuki in strength? Surely there wasn't anyone left who could seriously compete with them. ...Except for each other. What if, without the Bijuu to distract themselves with, the Akatsuki members turned on one another and tore the organization apart like that? An Akatsuki civil war would definitely be a sight to see.

Deidara hit his head against the nearest wall, resting his forehead against the wood. He knew, then and there, that he wasn't going to live a long life. He couldn't stand it. Not to mention it'd go against his artist's philosophy. If he was feeling old at twenty-two, then he gave himself five more years before having to blow himself up himself. Maximum.

"What are you doing?" He would have jumped if he hadn't heard Sasori approach. Deidara rotated his head so that his cheek rather than forehead was resting against the wood, looking at Sasori.

"I'm twenty-two, yeah," he said drearily.

"Congratulations. Was this a recent turn of events?" Sasori replied smoothly.

"No, a few months ago. How old are you, Sasori-danna?"

"I'm not telling."

"Why not?"

"If I told you, then you'd probably have me arrested. Or at least try to. You couldn't prove anything, unless you managed to bribe Kakuzu."

Deidara raised his head, looking at his partner flatly. "Are you really that much older than I am, yeah?"

"Actually, yes. If you're only twenty-two." Sasori kept his voice completely calm as though they weren't talking about an alarming age difference. The blonde looked at him for a moment later, and then put his forehead back against the wall.

"I wouldn't even care, yeah..."

"I know that. But I'd prefer to keep my age a secret," he replied curtly. "It's one of the few things you don't know about me."

"How much would it take to bribe Kakuzu?"

"More than you make in a year."

Deidara laughed at this, at the whole notion of bribing another member just to find out Sasori's age. He didn't care, really. Sasori was Sasori, and a number wouldn't change that. Nor would it change the fact that he'd still look like a teenager. And just like that, Deidara felt the tension in his shoulders and mind melt away. So what if he was twenty-two? Shinobi didn't live long enough as it was, and it'd only distract him if he kept mulling it over. He'd just have to live life like he had been, regardless of how old he was getting.

And so what if he and Hinata belonged to two different generations? They'd crossed bigger bridges than that with their bond. Deidara was fine were he was.

-.-.-

Something most people hadn't expected or realized was that Sasori and Neji got along quite well. Usually, while Deidara and Hinata went off on their own exploring the wilds of Amegakure, the pair would hole up in the library together. They both knew the value of silence, but at the same time, very rarely was there a quiet moment.

Sasori and Neji were both interested in the same things, art aside. Strategies, different styles of fighting, and outmaneuvering the opponent before he outmaneuvered you. They would have surprisingly in-depth talks about these things, sharing battlefield stories with each other and relating it to some strategy or theory they'd just read about.

"You act much older than you are," Sasori told him one day. Neji honestly had no idea how to take that, especially coming from the puppeteer. "When I was your age, I did the same thing, so it's not a bad thing." The brunette relaxed with that addition.

"Thank you. It's nice to know that veterans can still connect with the generation beneath them," he replied with a rue grin.

Sasori looked up at him from his book, narrowing his eyes. "Watch it, brat. We may have never fought each other, but I doubt you'll hold up as tenaciously as Deidara."

"I'll keep that in mind."

It was a toss up between Hinata and Deidara for who was more surprised by their camaraderie. Neither of them had been expecting it. Then again, Sasori got along well with *no one*, and Neji usually kept to himself. So it wasn't as if they were basing their astonishment on nothing.

There were other similar pairs in Ame. For example, Hinata had found out by accident one day that Kabuto and Konan had been fairly close. And Hinata herself wasn't bothered by Kisame's company as much as she probably should have been. (Though she chalked that up to having to stick with Itachi for her lessons daily.)

And Deidara found out that if he could keep the black side down, Zetsu really was a cool guy. True, he didn't appreciate accidentally eating a clay animal (which had somehow happened twice now), but he could value raw carnage like no one else could.

With these strange connections they shared, life went on.

-.-.-

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm afraid I have to echo the question. It's rare we see you in the library."

Deidara huffed and ignored the two. In his opinion, they were the same; stuck up, stoic and know-it-alls. He walked past them both with eyes locked onto his target, a large bookshelf filled with some of the oldest, thickest books in the building. Neji and Sasori just followed his movement with their eyes, pretending to continue reading. If the blonde was actually in the library for something, it couldn't be good.

"What are you looking for?" Sasori asked, trying again.

"Kakuzu said there's a book in here with record of the strongest shinobi in history, yeah. I want to see how old they all were," Deidara replied carefully, standing on tiptoe to retrieve the tome he'd come for.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "What is with you and ages all of a sudden?"

Neji looked at him, frowning faintly. "This isn't new?"

"He's somehow convinced himself that he's getting old."

"Neji is only seventeen, yeah. And he can hold his own in a fight against me." Deidara flipped through the pages of the book eagerly. It gave off a small cloud of dust with each movement, only showing how old it really was. Certainly older than all three of the shinobi in the library. Combined.

"Sasuke's only sixteen. And he thinks he's stronger than Itachi," Neji pointed out unhelpfully. Sasori shot him a glare, but the brunette genius just shrugged helplessly. "I'm only stating the truth."

"See? And Itachi is twenty-one, too—"

"No he's not, he turned twenty-two a few days ago," Sasori interrupted, finally returning to his book. Apparently he'd had enough of Deidara's antics.

"... Well, fine, then. I'm still older by a few months, yeah." Deidara sighed, scattering dust from the pages below his chin, which made him sneeze. "Anyway, if you look at this, it looks like strong

shinobi have been getting younger and younger. Konoha's fourth Hokage was only twenty-four when he was appointed it, yeah. The Tsuchikage I killed was twenty-nine. Outside of the Akatsuki, how many shinobi can you name over thirty?" he demanded of them.

"The Sannin," Neji replied automatically, flipping a page in his own book. "The Sandaime, too."

"My grandmother, my grand-uncle, Hatake Kakashi, Hatake Sakumo, the third Kazekage, the fourth Kazekage—"

"Nevermind," Deidara growled, returning to his book. Sasori and Neji shared a triumphant smile before returning to their own.

"You asked." The Hyuuga shrugged minutely. "I think you're worrying about nothing, in any case..."

"Finally, someone else sees how nonsensical you're being, Deidara."

Deidara snorted, and sulkily ducked down over his book once more. He wasn't giving up that easily. He knew he was right. Right about what, that he was less than sure about. But he had to be right about whatever it was. Shinobi were getting stronger faster, resulting in younger ages, and that would in turn affect the average lifespan of ninja in general (which was already dismally low). Without older shinobi around to balance that out, shinobi-dom could get very stupid, very fast. A bunch of kids running around with S-classed ninjutsu? Scary thought.

"Deidara, just drop it," Sasori said after an hour.

"No."

"Why not?" he asked plaintively.

"Because I'm fed up with younger ninja, yeah," he snapped. He didn't miss Neji's loud sigh full of exasperation, either. He heard a book snap shut, and a moment later, someone placed a hand on his shoulder, pulling him backward from his book none-too-gently.

"Deidara, how do you think *I* feel, then? You're already a handful for me and I've been around much longer than you have," Sasori pointed out, his voice flat. Deidara blinked when he realized all of his whining about age must have annoyed him. (Good thing Kakuzu hadn't heard him, then.)

"Yeah, well... you're Sasori-danna, yeah. You get annoyed at everything."

Sasori rolled his eyes, and then yanked Deidara up by the chakra strings he'd just connected to his shirt. "Come outside. We're going to prove once and for all that your beliefs about age are as stupid as your beliefs about art. Neji, if you would."

"Of course."

Outside, it was overcast, but thankfully not raining. The sky rumbled faintly, though, threatening the shinobi below with it if they weren't careful. Sasori dropped Deidara in the middle of the street and continued walking, only turning around to face him when he was a suitable distance away.

"Deidara, if your idiotic theory is correct, then Neji should be stronger than both of us, correct?"

"I didn't say that," he replied defensively, picking himself up. "I just said it was a general trend."

"You're forgetting that shinobi don't just die off that simply, though. Even if they're getting stronger, faster—something you should be complaining about, anyway—the older ones are still

around to kick some sense into them." Deidara glanced nervously at Neji as Sasori spoke, keeping tabs on the brunette. Just in case. He didn't feel like a two-on-one fight right now.

"I was just saying—"

"You were just being stupid," Sasori cut across harshly. "Now you are either going to drop the subject *right now* or I am going to beat you into the ground. Make your decision."

"I don't want to fight you, yeah," Deidara replied incredulously, unable to believe that Sasori was even suggesting it.

"Then quit whining about it. You're too young to be worrying about your age right now."

That solved the situation, but Deidara didn't quit worrying. And, as these things tend to do, it escalated. Somehow it evolved into a village-wide tournament for an impressive trophy and fame, while Sasori was just glad of it so he could prove to Deidara that he was being an idiot. "I'll make a bet with you, Deidara."

"Hm?" The blonde wasn't pleased with the tournament idea, even if it had accidentally been his own fault. (And, to 'keep them out of trouble', Pein had enrolled the entire Akatsuki, of course. Even Konan, since she would have thrown him out the window if he didn't.)

"If the top three are over thirty, you will *never* make another crack about age again. The only time you will say *anything* age-related about yourself or anyone else is on a birthday." Sasori paused, to think, tapping a finger against his lip. "Oh, and you'll stop with the 'art is fleeting' nonsense, too."

Deidara grinned savagely. "And if I win, and there's even one person under thirty, then... I keep to keep whining about my age and my *awesome* art, yeah, and you'll have to... umm..." For a moment, he couldn't come up with a suitable punishment. The moment gradually shifted into a minute, and then two minutes. Five minutes after that, he finally had it. "You'll have to admit my art is the best, buy me dango for a week and wear a dress, yeah."

Sasori looked at him flatly. "Is that the best you can come up with?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Can *you* come up with anything better?" Deidara asked, pouting.

"Yes. In addition to my previous conditions, I'm going to add the following: *you* have to wear a dress with your hair in either a braid or pigtails, and you have to tell Hinata-hime about us."

"Us—oh." Deidara paled, but quickly regained his previous grin. "And then, I'm adding that if I win, *you* have to tell Bya-chan about us, you have to apologize for all the times you were mean to her—and me, yeah—and... hmm..."

While the Iwa-nin was deciding on his final condition, Sasori snagged Pein out of the crowd and said, "You'll have to be the judge for this bet, Leader-sama."

"What? Why me?" he asked, thoroughly confused.

"Deidara and I are holding a friendly wager. The conditions are that if the top three winners of this tournament are all over thirty, I win. If they even one is under thirty, then Deidara wins. He and I will figure out the stakes ourselves, but I just want someone with integrity to be witness to that," Sasori said with a disarming smile.

Pein blinked, and then grinned. "Alright, then. Let me know how it turns out, will you?"

"Of course, Leader-sama."

Deidara never did come up with another term to his side of the bet. And then, the rather shoddily put together tournament began.

-.-.-

It was decided by drawing names from a large bucket. Most of the shinobi of the village were participating, so Pein had Kakuzu clear a large space just outside the village walls for a suitable fighting space. It would have to be held over several days, just from the number of people that signed up. Especially going one battle at a time.

Hinata shifted around nervously near the edge of the ring, twiddling her fingers in her overly long sleeves. Her hood was up, both to prevent the rain from dripping down her back and to hide her identity. She couldn't believe she'd entered, and somehow she felt shamed by this. (Nevermind the fact that everyone else she knew had.) She just knew that people were expecting her to be there only as a cheerleader; people laughed when Hyuuga Hinata fought. It had happened at both of her chuunin exams, and even in a few of the friendly tournaments from the academy days. She just wasn't a fighter.

Hopefully that label would change today.

The rules were simple. She had memorized them, purely for that fact. No killing (they didn't want to lose any more Ame-nin, so soon after a war). No cutting off body parts unless you absolutely must (Kakuzu offered to fix the unfortunate souls who would undoubtedly get something severed. Of course, he offered his services for a price). If the judge deemed your opponent dealt with or incapacitated, the fight stopped then and there. No stepping out of the ring's boundaries. You could only fight with what you brought into the ring with you; only what was on your physical body (it was unknown whether or not this included summons, but she supposed it did).

It was all amazingly similar to the chuunin exams. Which was the main reason why Hinata entered.

Now, however, she felt less than confident. She was surrounded by big, strong men on most sides, and a few kunoichi whose looks probably would have killed her if they could have. The first match had lasted all of seven seconds. Granted, it had been Kisame versus some poor chuunin, but still. *Seven* seconds.

Next, she watched wide-eyed as a genin and a jounin brawled. It wasn't as one-sided as she thought it would have been. In fact, she—along with the entire crowd—was amazed when the genin somehow *won*. He just dusted off his uniform and adjusted the breathing apparatus covering his mouth. The judge quickly got over his shock and announced him as the winner.

Hinata was surprised when the genin came over and stood by her, and she nervously edged away. He noticed this and just laughed. She smiled uncertainly at him, and then turned back to the next match. Saying he made her uncomfortable would be an understatement. *How is this guy still a genin?* She asked herself, stealthily taking another few steps away.

"No need to be nervous. I was just lucky," he said conversationally, his voice hollowed by the device covering his mouth. Hinata nodded and averted her eyes, biting her lip. He laughed again,

and finally left her alone, turning back to the next match.

The day passed rather slowly. Every Akatsuki member who fought that day—only three—easily won their match, no surprise. There were a few interesting turnarounds and come-from-behind victories, but a lot of the fights were predictable. Hinata was glad when her name wasn't called that day.

The next day, the crowd was larger than ever. Even civilians came to see the shinobi fight. Hinata found herself looking around for the genin from yesterday, but he was across the arena from her. She couldn't help but feel a bit of relief.

The relief washed away when the first name called was hers. She swallowed and stepped up, feeling the crowd's eyes on her. She knew, somewhere in that mass, Neji was watching her as well. The kunoichi stepped into the ring like it was a death sentence.

It might as well have been.

The judge put his hand into the bucket, drawing out another slip of paper. "Hidan."

Hinata raised her hand instantly, saying shrilly, "I forfeit!"

Hidan was already stepping up, swinging his scythe off his shoulder. "Oh, come *on*. I finally get to fight, and it's the bitch again?"

"Please, judge!" Hinata said, waving her arm in the air.

"I wasn't aware we were allowed to run like pansies," Hidan remarked, turning to the judge. "Are you going to let me be fight-less today, huh? Well, are you?"

"Um, n-no," the terrified judge replied. "Fight, begin."

The fact that it wasn't fair was the least of her worries right then. At least they weren't allowed to kill. But then again, Hidan had never been a stickler for the rules. So Hinata did the first thing that came to mind. Before he could even bring his scythe up, she had her hands together making seals. "*Chimatsuri no jutsu!*"

There was a brief moment of shock on the immortal's face opposite her, but it quickly faded away as the genjutsu took over. Hinata sagged in relief. It was her first real time using it, but Itachi had said it was Hidan's own jutsu, so it couldn't be *that* bad...

She jumped when Hidan promptly cut off his own head, dragging his scythe across his neck and then down into his chest. Either fortunately or unfortunately, the match was ended right then. Mostly because Hidan was headless and bleeding quite profusely, so he wouldn't be fighting again any time soon.

Hinata covered her mouth to stop herself from vomiting. She turned and staggered out of the ring, swearing that she was *never* using that jutsu again.

"Heh, that wasn't luck, now was it? I had no idea that you were that strong, kunoichi-san." She jumped when she heard the hollowed-out voice of the genin from yesterday. He closed his eyes, undoubtedly smiling behind the breathing apparatus. "I guess I wasn't the only one to surprise everyone, huh?"

"I-I... sure," she said haltingly, swallowing.

"You're from Konoha, aren't you?" he asked suddenly.

"Huh? Oh, yes, I am, but..."

"How do I know that?"

"Yes."

"I visited Konoha once, for a chuunin exam. Needless to say, I lost, but I'd recognize the white eyes and dark hair anywhere," he said simply, with a one-armed shrug. "My name is Oboro, by the way."

"Hi-Hinata. Hyuuga Hinata, as you know."

"So what rank are you? Jounin?" Oboro asked politely.

"No, chuunin. I-I've just gotten some... special genjutsu training. I might test for jounin if Ame holds them sometime soon, though," she replied. "What about you?"

"After failing the chuunin exam twice, I've been too, uh, lazy to retake it." She got the feeling he was smiling again behind the device. "But as you can see, I'm not exactly a regular genin. I'm probably at least a chuunin, maybe a strong one like you."

Hinata had never been referred to as 'strong' before. She had no idea how to take it. So instead she just blushed and turned back to the fight, which was already halfway done.

-.-.-

By the end of the second day, the first round had been completed. Everyone had been through at least one fight, and the second round hopefully wouldn't take nearly as long. Only one person (aside from Hidan) had suffered serious injuries, too. No one had thought that an Ame tournament would be so tame.

Aside from Hidan, all of the Akatsuki members had progressed to the second round. Several of them expressed their shock that Hinata had won against him, much to the Jashinist's annoyance. Itachi was visibly proud (or as visibly as he could be anything) of his student, and even Deidara was glad she had learned that jutsu now.

So the third day dawned and it seemed as if the entire village's population was now watching these matches. Deidara was glad he didn't have stage fright. He watched avidly as the genin who beat the jounin two days ago went up against Kakuzu. He lasted surprisingly long, considering it was a *genin*, for god's sake. In the end, though, the genin went down and Kakuzu was the first Akatsuki member to make it to the next round.

No one had bothered to figure out how many rounds there would be. Everyone would just continue fighting until there was either one winner, or a battle royale to decide it. At least, that was the plan.

Itachi surprised everyone by being the second member to be defeated. He was defeated by the jounin commander, the one Deidara remembered as saying that Pein had killed Orochimaru. He scowled, but couldn't decide which he would have preferred; Itachi or the insufferable Iwa-nin to win. In the end, he just decided that he hoped to beat the latter in the next round.

Kisame, again, won his round in record time. Deidara, like the crowd, was rapidly figuring out that he was good at this sort of thing. With Samehada, he was an amazing close combat fighter. And, of course, the arena wasn't that large, so it was almost completely close-combat. The blonde made a note to watch out for him.

Then, came the inevitable; a match with two Akatsuki members. The crowd roared in approval (or maybe laughter) as Pein stepped up into the ring, sighing. Konan stepped up opposite him, smiling brightly. Deidara couldn't restrain a grin and leaned forward eagerly. He honestly didn't know how *this* was supposed to go. He would have put his money on Pein, because he was the *leader*, and Konan was pregnant. But then again... Konan was pregnant. She was a complete wild card because of that. Would Pein even fight back?

The fight began, and for a long while, neither of the two moved. The crowd waited with bated breath. Sure, it would seem as if Pein held the upper hand, but they had all watched Konan's first fight. She had been *vicious*, attacking from afar with her paper. Her opponent hadn't laid a hand on her. Of course, Pein was undoubtedly skilled enough to get past that defense, but would he *want* to? She was eight months pregnant! Could even the god of Amegakure, in good conscience, fight a pregnant woman? His pregnant woman?

Konan took a step forward, her sandal's high heel clicking on the packed-down earth. Pein stood his ground. She took another step forward, and slowly unfolded her hands from in front of her bulging belly. A third step forward, and Pein took one. She raised a hand, and a few papers fluttered down from her sleeve and folded themselves into butterflies and shuriken. He just took another step forward.

The shuriken shot themselves at him so fast that even Deidara could barely catch it, and he blocked them with a swipe of a real kunai. But then, they were both still once more. The crowd slowly let out its collective breath, and then started holding another.

Then, Konan raised her hand. "I forfeit. My ankles hurt and I don't feel like fighting right now," she said simply.

Deidara sighed, rubbing the back of his head. He had been expecting some epic battle... not a few paper shuriken and a forfeit. A few of the shinobi watching groaned in disbelief. Konan shot them all a dirty glare and then stepped carefully out of the ring, sashaying off. And just like that, the third Akatsuki member was removed from the tournament.

He looked around himself, at those still remaining. A lot of them were really young, his age or younger. True, Kakuzu and Sasori were still in the tournament and they were well over thirty, but Sasori said *all* of the top three had to be over thirty. The odds were with Deidara.

Another pair of names were called, and he ignored the match. Non-Akatsuki, anyway. There were a few impressive moves, but he was still disappointed that he couldn't have seen the first (and most likely only) purely Akatsuki match. The winner was declared when one of them went down. He was a gruff, grey-haired man. Deidara narrowed his eyes slightly; he was definitely over thirty. He'd have to watch out for him. Deidara glanced around him again, putting a mental age on all of the ninja he saw. He still had odds with him, at least...

Then, a name was called that he recognized. Hyuuga Neji. Deidara perked up with a smirk, hoping that the brunette got paired with someone who was devilishly difficult. Instead, he got a chuunin. The blonde rolled his eyes. The fight lasted all of two minutes. Neji took out the unlucky chuunin with his *Juuken*, paralyzing most of his body while it tried to reopen its chakra system.

Neji glanced in his direction as he walked out of the ring, swinging his arms limply. Deidara

defiantly returned the look, even going as far as to grin as well. Neji gave him a small, sly smile in return, and meshed with the crowd once more. Deidara knew who he wanted to fight in the next round.

But first, he had to get through this round. Which wouldn't be difficult, unless he was paired with an Akatsuki member. But, as he did a mental tally, he realized that the only ones left who hadn't fought yet were him, Sasori, Tobi and Zetsu. Tobi he could definitely take, but Sasori and Zetsu could pose a bit of a problem. He hadn't even seen Zetsu really *fight* before. Whereas he knew the schizophrenic Kusa-nin had seen his jutsu. But as long as he didn't get paired with either Sasori or Zetsu, he was in the clear.

Deidara's name was, near sunset, called. He practically skipped into the ring. By then, both Tobi and Sasori had already fought, so chances were with him. He glanced at Zetsu out of the corner of his eye, crossing his fingers within his sleeve. *As long as it's not Zetsu, I can fight, as long as it's not Zetsu*, he repeated mentally, waiting impatiently as the judge dug around in his bucket for the next name.

"Hyuuga Hinata."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The fight ensues! The second round wraps up, with only a handful of shinobi left to continue into the third. Deidara starts to get nervous as more and more are eliminated, whereas quite a few older ninja remain. And in the fourth round, the judge finally decides to do the unthinkable-battle royale!

Midlife Crisis Part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Forfeit!"

Too bad they said it at the *exact* same time. The pair looked at each other, and then started laughing. "No, I was going to forfeit. You go on ahead, Deidara-kun," Hinata said warmly.

"No, you can. This way you've beaten two Akatsuki members, yeah," he chirped in reply.

"But... then I'll just get beaten in the third round."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Bya-chan! You took out Hidan, didn't you?"

"That was..." She couldn't come up with a proper word to describe it.

So Deidara shrugged and continued. "You're a lot stronger than you think you are. You could at least make it to the third round, yeah."

"But... don't *you* want to?" she asked, clearly perplexed. Sure, he was competitive, but he was giving her a win! She shouldn't be complaining.

"Kinda." He grinned, planting his fists on his hips. "But, you know, if we continue on like this, we'll end up fighting just to see who can forfeit, yeah."

"Probably," she admitted. The two stood in the ring silently, looking at anything and everything but each other. Finally, Hinata said slowly, "You know... I don't think we've sparred... ever. Or fought, really... since the first time we met."

"Not seriously, yeah," Deidara agreed. "So, maybe it wouldn't be that bad to have a little fight, yeah?"

"A little one wouldn't hurt anyone."

They stood in silence once more, unsure of what to say next. Someone from the crowd shouted, "Just fight already!" A couple of agreements echoed around.

Hinata turned to him fully, her white eyes almost glowing under the shade of her hood. "You go first," she told him.

"Bya-chan, this isn't a turn-based game, yeah." And then, "... *You* go first."

"No, you."

"You."

"You."

"You—"

"*Someone* fucking fight, goddamn it!" Hidan shouted from the sidelines. Both contestants turned to glare at him, effectively shutting him up.

And then, as Deidara turned back, he saw her making seals. He just grinned, and reached into his clay pouch.

Deidara was airborne when the genjutsu struck. He felt his limbs go numb, but no matter what he did, he couldn't shake the cold that was slowly seeping into his body. He briefly wondered if it was actual ninjutsu, but hastily shook his head. She was a genjutsu specialist. It had to be an illusion. But he still couldn't shake the deadness in his limbs.

At least it seemed to be a real-time genjutsu. He still had his vision, too, as far as he could tell. She was still standing motionless, Byakugan blazing. Deidara wondered just how much strength he was actually going to use in this fight. Would he use any explosives? Unlikely.

-.-.-

Hinata had used a trick Itachi had taught her, one that was surprisingly efficient at taking out enemies. Simply use *two* genjutsu. They'll break the first, and unless it's with an injury, they won't break the second.

Unfortunately, Deidara broke through the illusions with an injury.

He fell off his bird.

She reflected on the fact that maybe it wasn't the brightest to cast genjutsu on him while he was airborne. Hinata ran over in concern, even going as far as helping him up as he rubbed his arm. Deidara just grinned at her for a moment, and then melted into clay. She was aghast, though vaguely thankful he didn't detonate it.

She spotted him with her Byakugan, down below the ground. Hiding, then. Hinata thought for a moment, wondering how she could get him out. A gravity-warping jutsu would definitely affect him, but he'd just stay down there. And it wouldn't do to trap him in a genjutsu while he was still underground. She was forced to wait.

Luckily, Deidara was an impatient man.

Next thing she knew, something grabbed her ankle and pulled downward. She dispersed in a flock of ravens before Deidara could pull her down into the ground, and she reappeared on the other side of the arena. He charged her, pulling his arm back for a punch, but she sidestepped him. Unfortunately for her, it was a feint. Deidara turned before she could react and caught her around the waist, picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder. She was momentarily dazed just from his nerve.

Deidara carried Hinata back across the ring, towards the crane perched on the ground. She started kicking and screaming, though, and managed to kick him hard enough in the chest to send them both tumbling to the ground, halfway there. They rolled away from each other and to their feet. They stared at each other for a few moments, and then started circling.

They both started making signs at the same time. Deidara finished first. And Hinata was swallowed by the same earth jutsu for the second time in her life. At least she knew how to get out of it easily this time. She gathered chakra into her hands and pushed directly upward, caving in the little bubble. The dark-haired kunoichi jumped out of the hole—and promptly hit her head on Deidara. He had been leaning over the hole. He deftly caught her and put her in a full nelson,

keeping her hands far apart.

Hinata struggled and tried to kick him, but as she looked back, she noticed a single thing. He was glaring.

This... This is Karura! Which meant that the real Deidara was still hiding somewhere. And Hinata didn't dare struggle harder now; she didn't want to detonate the bomb. She just searched him out with her Byakugan. No sign of him.

"It's amazing how shinobi over think things sometimes, isn't it, yeah?" Deidara leaned down and whispered in her ear. She gave a start; he had tricked her! He'd really been behind her the whole time, and she had just stood there placidly. And thanks to the position, he could still make hand signs.

Hinata felt something drop down onto her shoulder, and then Deidara suddenly shifted. For a moment, he let her go, and her hands dropped to her sides limply. She was so surprised that she did nothing more than stumble forward. Then, whatever had landed on her shoulder was suddenly gone.

Hinata looked down at her feet, where a clay snake was coiled. She took an involuntary step backward. She didn't really care for snakes. It slithered up to her again, and this time started curling up around her legs. She knew immediately what it was doing, and tried to kick it off. It only resulted in her falling backwards, unable to balance herself in time.

"Give up yet?" Deidara leaned over her upside-down, grinning.

"You only have my ankles tied!" And to prove this, she reached up and pushed chakra into his system with her palm, right over his stomach. He jumped back before his chakra system could overload, but Hinata just laughed and kicked her feet upward, so she was standing on her hands. Deidara swore as she then twisted and brought her bound feet down in a ferocious kick, catching the top of his head. He slammed into the packed dirt below with a crunch, Hinata now standing on top of him, arms spread for balance.

"Wow, I hadn't expected that, yeah..." He got up on all fours, spitting out a bit of blood. From the sudden movement, she toppled over backward, landing behind him. "Bya-chan's still got some moves, huh?"

"More than you think," she replied, reaching down to try to yank the snake off of her ankles. Deidara got back to his feet, shaking his head to try to clear his vision. That had hurt more than he'd expected it to. He glanced around the arena, looking for something he could use. Meanwhile, Hinata had gotten back to her feet, a bit unsteadily; she hadn't been able to get the snake off. Though it had bitten her on the hand for her trouble.

Hinata knew that with the Byakugan still active, he wouldn't be surprising her. Which was what he was trying to do. So she just kept her arms out for balance, watching him. She also made sure to watch the snake below, and the crane on the other side of the ring. If he reached for the clay, it'd take time to sculpt. If he started doing signs, she'd just counter with genjutsu. So he was left with taijutsu. But even against that, she had the *Kaiten* and the gentle fist style in general. *If only I could get that stupid snake off my feet*, she thought sourly, glancing down with her Byakugan. It raised its head, sticking its forked tongue out at her.

Deidara reached into his clay pouch. Hinata brought her hands together in a flash for a genjutsu. He instead snapped his hand out and went for a kunai, throwing it at her. Since her hands were mid-sign, she didn't have time to return it; the dark-haired kunoichi bent back at the waist, landing

on her hands.

Too late she spotted that the snake had split apart.

Two smaller, skinnier serpents shot towards her hands before she could push herself back into a standing position. Hinata instead kicked her feet up again so she was just on her hands, and then pushed off into a jump. The snakes narrowly missed her fingertips.

Hinata smirked. His little distraction plan hadn't worked.

But, of course, then she realized that she couldn't dodge in midair. (Or kick.) The crane on the far side of the arena shot into the air, slithering through the air like one of the snakes she had just left behind. It wrapped her in its wings and simply let them both fall, landing on the dirt below. Hinata struggled in the clay's grasp, but she was pretty tightly in. And she couldn't get enough movement going for a *Kaiten*. "...I'm stuck," she said plainly, sighing. She knew when she was beat.

Sasori had half-expected Hinata to win. Mostly because Deidara would not hurt her. But he was pleased nonetheless when Deidara came out on top. And Hinata ended up with nothing more than a bruise or two. The blonde exited the arena to applause and laughter, taking his victory solemnly. Unlike the kunoichi, he had nearly gotten a tooth knocked loose and sprained a wrist. Not to mention a pretty nasty scrape when she kicked his head into the ground.

"You're an idiot," Sasori told him when he was within earshot. Deidara looked up expectantly, expression darkening when he saw it was just the Suna-nin.

"Why? Because I won, yeah?"

"No, because you got needlessly injured while trying to keep her out of harm's way. You still have a few more rounds to go if you want to win, you know."

"Yeah, whatever. Three of the Akatsuki members are already out of the tournament. The rest of them aren't strong enough to make me break a sweat, yeah," he replied with an arrogant grin.

"We'll see," Sasori replied simply.

The day ended with the last of the second round. Now there were only fifty contestants left, and Deidara still had odds on his side. It was decided that they would hold one more round, to get the number down to a mere twenty-five, and then the final round would be a battle royale. He could have laughed for how relieved he was; it meant that this wasn't just chance anymore. He could actively hunt down all of the shinobi over thirty. Of course, Sasori would probably try to head him off, or do the same. It made their little wager more interesting.

He couldn't sleep that night. He tossed and turned and tried to think of a way that he could beat

Sasori. Because, after all, he had only really beaten him once, and that was because he'd been ordered to hold back. Deidara was sure that if his partner really wanted to, he'd be out of the tournament in a matter of minutes. And if he just made a bird to keep out of range, he'd just make himself a target for some sniper... after all, in a battle royale, there was no one you could trust. He'd have twenty-four enemies in that fight. (Granted he made it to that round, but the thought that he wouldn't never crossed his mind. Deidara was not an insecure person.)

When light finally peeked through his window—he'd taken to sleeping in Hinata's vacated room, since he didn't trust himself to be in Sasori's room with the tournament—Deidara doubted he'd gotten two hours of sleep. So he groggily got out of bed, stretched, and popped a soldier pill for energy. It was only the third round today. Maybe he'd get lucky and Sasori would be taken out.

Deidara was not a lucky person.

The day ended with mixed results. Tobi and Zetsu were both out, leaving only half the Akatsuki still in the fight. Zetsu had honestly lost his battle—he had been matched against a woman who turned the entire arena into quicksand *while* he was already underground—but Tobi, surprisingly, had merely forfeited his when he'd been paired against Kakuzu. This surprised everyone, but Tobi wouldn't say anything other than "I didn't want to fight another Akatsuki member," accompanied with a nonchalant shrug.

Sasori was not taken out.

As he passed Deidara on the way to the tower, he just smirked and said, "See you tomorrow, brat."

Deidara turned around right then and there and stalked away from him, tracking down Hinata. She was with Neji (who had also made it to the final round), and surprisingly, also Kisho. Apparently he'd come out to see the fights that afternoon. "Hey, Neji."

"What do you want?" the brunette asked, frowning. Usually they never spoke unless it was to insult each other. Even Hinata looked blindsided by this turn of events.

"Sasori-danna and I made a... bet, yeah," he stated bluntly.

"...And you want my help?"

"No, I want you to stay out of my way."

Neji's frown intensified. He stopped walking, Hinata and Kisho stopping a pace after. He turned fully to Deidara, crossed his arms, and looked down his nose at him. (Because Neji *did* have a few scarce centimeters on him, so he could actually look down at Deidara. Barely.) "What are you saying?"

"Look, I know Sasori-danna and I are going to be fighting until one of us is out. I know that you'd want dearly to beat me into the ground, too, but I'm asking you to wait until me and him settle our differences, yeah." Deidara looked away, embarrassed to even have to ask this. But he'd swallow his pride now, because if he lost, it meant his pride would altogether vanish later.

"And why would I bother doing that?"

"Because Sasori-danna would easily take you out if you got in our way, for one." He didn't like where this was going. Neji just *had* to ask; it meant he was going to lose his temper. It was humbling enough he was even bothering to ask him for this favor. He wasn't going to beg for it.

"For two...?" the brunette prompted expectantly.

Deidara uncrossed his own arms, Neji mimicking the movement, though the blonde just growled and snapped his head up to look him in the eye. "Fine! If you want to play stubborn and stupid, I'll just take you out before you can interfere, yeah!"

He turned and stormed away, ignoring Hinata's calls of distress. He was already fed up with the prospect of the entire wager-and Sasori—but he didn't need Neji's conceit compounding that. He'd fight them both on his own.

-.-.-

The arena had been moved to a larger, more densely forested area. After all, there would be twenty-five shinobi in a full battle royale. (Still no killing, though.) And the rule stating that you were out if you were thrown out still stood. Everyone was completely aware of this.

Deidara nervously walked into the ring, keeping his back straight and knees bent. He wouldn't put it past most of them to start before the judge called for them to. Especially Sasori.

Sasori, Pein, Kakuzu, Kisame and Deidara himself were all that was left of the Akatsuki in the tournament. The other half of the organization watched sullenly from the sidelines. One-fifth of the finalists were in the Akatsuki. Deidara eyed the other four warily. He honestly didn't know about Pein, but the other three were all over thirty. (Even though Kisame was just barely.) He'd have to take all of them out if he wanted to win this bet. Though maybe he'd get lucky and one of the other, non-Akatsuki shinobi—Neji came to mind—would take out someone for him. He'd have to just play it by ear.

He looked around him. The forest was pretty dense, considering it was post-war Ame. Most of the undergrowth was baby trees, and those that stood were scorched or completely dead husks of trunks. He wasn't even sure if all of them could support his weight. Mostly it'd be the undergrowth he'd have to worry about. The burned-out forest had created fertile soil, and it was green nearly to his waist. It'd be easy to trip in it, even for a ninja.

The judge was busy talking to Kakuzu, probably about it being against the rules to toast the entire arena in a single jutsu. Deidara shifted nervously from foot to foot, trying to pick Sasori out of the forest. He had scarlet hair, for god's sake! It should be easy. But after they'd scattered, it was difficult. Even Pein, with his orange hair, was nowhere to be found. Deidara unconsciously ran a hand through his own blonde hair. The bright hair color hadn't helped him in Iwa and it wouldn't help him in Ame. Maybe he should just dye it.

"And—start!"

"What—?!" Deidara turned towards the judge, unable to believe he'd start it so suddenly. His head only made half the movement before something slammed into him, and he crashed down into the undergrowth, only stopping when he hit his head on a tree. He was already rolling away, but something stopped him. He snapped his head back to glare up at his assailant.

Predictably, it was Sasori.

He had Deidara tied up with a length of steel cable before the blonde could do so much as struggle. "Come along peacefully, and I won't have to hurt you," Sasori said cheerfully, picking him up and throwing him over his shoulder. The clone promptly melted back into clay, much to his annoyance.

"Why did I get the feeling that you were trying to kidnap me, not beat me, yeah?" Deidara asked. He was hanging upside down by the feet on the nearest (sturdy) tree, arms crossed. They were only crossed so he could hide the mouths on his hands, which were chewing fervently.

"It'd be easier to just tie you up and throw you out of the ring." Sasori stood up, his back to him. He turned around quickly, using the movement to cover his arm flinging a kunai in Deidara's direction. He stepped to the side, the blade just narrowly missing his cheek. But it seemed that even that attack was a cover up; Sasori had used that movement, in turn, to mask the fact that he had whipped a summoning scroll out of his sleeve. Before Deidara could stop him, there was suddenly a black-clad, hulking puppet with a nasty glare between them. "You've never fought the Sandaime, have you?"

"Technically, yes. It was just Yutaka using it, yeah," Deidara fielded, retreating a few steps. He'd already jumped off the tree, so it wouldn't do anything to get back in it.

Sasori scowled. "He didn't know *how* to use it," he grumbled, twitching his fingers. The puppet in between them shifted to life with the cracking of joints, something black and fine falling out, like some sort of twisted dust. Deidara doubted it was anything so harmless.

"Is this the one with that iron sand thing you talked about?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Deidara paused, fishing around for something else to stall with. He was *almost* done creating a get-away bird... "How did the judge let you use your puppets?"

"Technically, they came into the ring with me, just as a scroll. And I promised I would only use my own body and a single puppet. Only instead of Hiruko, who is known rather well by several of you, I decided to use the Sandaime," Sasori explained with a patient smile. Deidara wasn't looking at his face; he was looking at his hands. All puppet users had to use their fingers to control their marionettes, so it was just a matter of watching for the movement.

There—the tiniest flick of his index finger. Deidara reflexively threw himself to the side, using the nearest tree for cover as a veritable wave of black sand went for the spot he'd just vacated. Great. It was Gaara all over again. While his body was hidden by the bulk of the baked tree, he maximized a crow and jumped onto its back. He was clear of the fighting by the time the tree went down, thrown aside like a matchstick by the iron sand.

Deidara turned back around, grinning down at the Sasori-sized dot in the trees. Unfortunately, he wasn't watching where he was going. And being high in the air like that, he was a target.

He barely avoided impalement himself as Samehada tore upwards through the bird, shredding it and effectively ruining Deidara's escape attempt. As he was falling back down, Deidara made sure to throw his other bomb at Kisame. If they were throwing weapons, he could throw it back, after all. He didn't see whether or not it managed to hurt the Kiri-nin at all, as he hit the ground running. Already he heard the hiss of the iron sand behind him.

Deidara almost turned around to see how far ahead he was. Almost. Then he remembered where that had put him, and just kept running. He started a zigzag pattern, trying to throw off the sand. Or puppet. At this point, he didn't know *what* was chasing him, just that it was.

He skidded to a halt, spotting the black-clad figure ahead of him. So it was the sand chasing him—right into the puppet's waiting sword! Deidara ducked under the first swing, scrambling past it. Unfortunately, he had done the very thing he'd been so wary of earlier; he'd tripped over something

in the thick underbrush. The blonde slammed into the ground and was trying to kick the offending plant away from him when something hard and grainy clamped around his calf.

Next thing he knew, he was dangling upside-down by the ankles, supported by nothing more than black sand. He glared defiantly at the Sandaime puppet, *hoping* that it threw him. After all, he could catch himself in midair, no problem.

Either Sasori forgot about this or he'd been hoping that his already created clay was spent, because with a swing that rather hurt, Deidara was tossed through the air.

Then, he realized that Sasori had done none of those. They were *much* closer to the border than he had thought. The blonde caught himself less than a meter from the ground, the owl holding him evicting an *ooh* from the crowd. Slowly, the clay bird hauled him back into the air, away from the outside.

But again, something caught his bird before he could barely use it. "Shit!" he swore, landing on the nearest tree. Thankfully, it was in the arena. He glared around for the culprit—honestly, he was tired of losing his birds in the first few seconds; art was fleeting, but not the art he used as a ride!—when he heard a crack below him.

Great. He had picked one of the trees that had been burned out.

Deidara jumped off of the dead tree, but he miscalculated. The branch had sunk a few centimeters, just enough to throw off his leap of faith. He landed awkwardly, pain shooting through one of his ankles. Regardless, the Iwa artist started running. He had no idea where in the arena he was now, or where anyone else was. But he couldn't fly; he kept making himself a target up in the air like that. He was grounded, at least until he could thin out the population a bit.

Deidara planted a few bombs that he had already created, throwing them carelessly, to await someone stepping on them. If all else failed, he could always detonate them all with a sign for a suitable distraction. He nearly tripped again, too, but caught himself. And luckily, this time there were no creepy puppets waiting for him when he got back up.

He heard something to his right, and instinctively ducked. A kunai with a blast note whistled over his head, sinking into the nearest tree. Deidara scampered away from it fearfully; he mistrusted *normal* bombs like that. He wasn't sure, either, of who had thrown it. The area seemed empty, now.

Damn, if only I had the Byakugan, he thought sourly, looking around him warily. And just like that, Deidara knew who was out for him now.

Since he was expecting it at that point, it was easy ducking under the first strike. Even so, the air tingled with chakra from the near miss. Neji tried to tag him again with chakra-filled palms, but Deidara flipped backwards out of his reach. "So I guess you decided not to honor my favor, yeah?"

"You're the one who stumbled into my trap. That couldn't be helped," Neji replied succinctly. He tried to hit Deidara again, but the blonde again danced out of the way. He was just a hair's breadth faster than the brunette, for which he was thankful. But this was still way too close for him to be comfortable fighting. His taijutsu knowledge was still painfully limited, whereas Neji relied almost exclusively on it.

Then something interrupted their fight. Neji looked up, narrowing his eyes in confusion. A beat later, Deidara did the same, purely to see what had gotten him so perplexed. A moment too late, he realized what it was. Neji had never fought Sasori; he didn't know what the puppeteer and his puppets looked like just as chakra signatures. Deidara threw himself to the ground, covering his

head with his hands, just as a wave of black, glittering sand shot out of the forest.

He saw Neji throw himself desperately into a spin, the *Kaiten* repelling the sand effectively. But of course, he had to stop sometime. By the time he stumbled to a halt, the iron sand had him up in the air, pinned against a blackened tree, bound and keeping him bound. Deidara heard Sasori step cautiously through the undergrowth. It was hard to tell who was more surprised, Sasori or Neji. He obviously hadn't been expecting to catch the brunette, and likewise Neji hadn't been expecting that the one behind the bizarre attack to be the redhead.

"Where's—"

Waist-high or not, Deidara *was* just hiding in a patch of grass. He felt Sasori nudge his side with his sandal, and reluctantly the blonde got up.

After releasing Neji, Sasori started marching them towards the edge of the arena. Both of the younger shinobi had their hands folded behind their heads, like prisoners of war. It was degrading. They even passed Pein on the way, who was quickly dispatching a jounin. He stared at them in curiosity, but didn't make any move to stop Sasori.

When they cleared the trees, the limit of the arena was just meters in front of them. Neji and Deidara both sighed in unison at the sight. As if that was some sort of agreement, the two bolted, in opposite directions.

Deidara saw the Sandaime go after Neji. He grinned to himself, turning back ahead, thinking, *Poor bastard*. Unfortunately, he felt something hit his shoulder and realized that Sasori himself had come after him. Poor bastard indeed. Deidara twisted in mid-stride, pulling the kunai out of his shoulder. He noticed that the tip glistened with something that wasn't blood just as his legs seized up.

The blonde tumbled head over heels, feeling a numbness overtake his entire body with an alarming speed. He tried to get back to his feet, but again, his legs gave out on him and he was grounded. Literally.

Soon, Sasori was yet again marching Neji to the border, after catching him as well. The Suna-nin even went as far as to make petty conversation. "It's nothing personal, Neji. It's just that Deidara and I made a friendly wager about the outcome of this tournament, and you would be helping him if you stayed in the tournament."

"I can understand that," he replied through gritted teeth.

"I thought the judge wouldn't allow you to use poison, yeah," Deidara said. At least his mouth still worked. Otherwise he'd just have to shout incoherently.

"As long as it's not deadly, he said I could. This was a paralyzing poison, so I went ahead and used it," Sasori replied.

And just like that, they were at the boundary again. Sasori, who had thrown Deidara over one shoulder, nodded towards Neji. The Hyuuga genius glared reproachfully at him, not moving. "Oh, just be lucky that I decided you could walk of your own volition. You could be like Deidara here," Sasori said evenly.

Neji huffed, and took the step needed to disqualify himself. He sat down where he was, crossing his arms, glaring up at Sasori. The redhead grinned at him, and then dumped the still-paralyzed Deidara on his lap. Neji hadn't been expecting that and tried to shove the blonde off. Sasori

chuckled, and then called his Sandaime back closer to him and turned around.

He turned around to stare into the chest of Kakuzu.

Kakuzu merely picked Sasori up by the back of the uniform, and gave him a toss. Sasori caught himself with the Sandaime and some chakra strings, narrowly avoiding getting out. Neji and Deidara, still tangled together, watched with grim amusement. Sasori swung back into the arena, just in time for Kakuzu to throw the Sandaime out of the ring with all his might. The unfortunate redhead was still attached by chakra strings, too.

Sasori was yanked out of the arena, but cut the chakra strings and landed—on one of the spectator's heads. The crowd had pressed in eagerly at the thought of an Akatsuki battle so close to the boundary, and now seemed caught off guard that he would resort to such an idiotic move to try to save himself.

"Is that legal?"

"Is that allowed?"

"Is he out?"

"The rules explicitly state that if you touch the *ground* outside the boundary, you are out," Sasori said loudly, scowling. The crowd stopped its outright questioning, and instead settled on mutinous mutters. Someone had run off to fetch the judge, just in case. Sasori stood placidly on top of the unfortunate man's shoulders (which was at least more comfortable for him than his head), waiting for the say of the judge. Kakuzu glared at him from the other side of the arena.

Deidara, to whom feeling was slowly returning, sat up off of Neji. Neji was looking between Kakuzu and Sasori. "The judge is going to let Sasori get away with it," he muttered to himself.

"Yeah, probably... he's already bended the rules several times for Akatsuki members, yeah," Deidara replied. "Sasori-danna's in the clear, as long as no one throws him off."

As if on cue, the irate man who had been supporting Sasori that far suddenly grabbed Sasori's ankles and gave him a toss. The puppeteer carefully caught himself on another member of the crowd, but he didn't seem as thrilled, either. Sasori jumped from crowd member to crowd member, even pausing once, perched on Zetsu's plant appendages before the Kusa-nin threw him off as well. The judge would have to hurry if he wanted to help Sasori. It turned into a sort of game for the crowd. See who could throw Sasori off first.

Even Deidara had to admit it was fun to watch. A few times, Sasori almost lost his balance, but caught himself on shorter members of the crowd each time. He could have sworn he stepped on Hinata more than what was strictly necessary. Finally, he managed to stand carefully on an Ame shinobi's head, balanced precariously on one leg. The man below him seemed unenthused, but didn't move to knock him off. Sasori let out an audible sigh of relief at this.

"What's going on here?" Finally, the judge arrived.

"The rules stated that you're only out of the tournament if you touch the *ground* outside of the ring!" Sasori said immediately, still trying not to fall. The judge blanched, unsure of how to take this. He glanced nervously at Kakuzu, who hadn't said anything yet. The giant of a man was looking steadily away, arms crossed.

"Well, yes, I suppose, but—"

"But *what*." It wasn't a question. Sasori hadn't balanced this long on people's heads and shoulders for a no.

"Uhh... just... don't do it again. From now on, touching anything outside the ring is disqualification. Get back in there..." the judge said lamely, head drooping. So even he knew he was beaten if an Akatsuki member raised a fuss about it.

Sasori leapt nimbly back into the arena, facing away from the crowd. "You didn't say anything," he said to Kakuzu quietly.

"I knew you'd win the damn case. Besides, now I get to do this, and it's twice as embarrassing for you!" Kakuzu gave Sasori a push, just enough to knock him off balance. And without throwing him into the air again, just in case the crowd caught him and didn't throw a fit about it, Sasori couldn't do anything except teeter on the very edge of the boundary. His arms wind milled for a moment, before Kakuzu leaned back and planted a foot squarely on Sasori's chest. And then, he pushed.

Sasori fell back with a thump on his behind, glaring daggers up at Kakuzu. Deidara just laughed at him.

--.-

Pein came in first place. Kisame second, Kakuzu third. Deidara knew Kakuzu was over thirty, but he only needed one of the other two to be under. "Kisame, Kisame! How old are you, yeah?"

"Thirty-two. Why?" the swordsman asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Ugh. Nevermind." So Pein was his last hope, huh? "Leader-sama! Leader-sama, yeah!"

"I'm thirty, Deidara," the man replied before he could even ask the question. Deidara's face slowly fell. Pein smiled, and then said, "Your wager was that one had to be *under* thirty. Sasori's said all three had to be *over* thirty."

"So you planned on getting that far?" Sasori asked quietly.

"I had wanted to get to the final three, of course. It'd be arrogant of me to say I *planned* on it," Pein replied innocently, shrugging. Sasori's glare answered him. "I just wanted to see what you two would do with that loophole. Speaking of such, what were the conditions of your little bet?"

"Since no one won..." Deidara said slowly, trying to duck out of what he knew was coming, "It means neither of us has to do anything, yeah."

"Sounds fair to me." Sasori agreed at once.

"No, no," Pein smiled indulgently at the pair. By now, Kisame and Kakuzu were eagerly listening in as well. "I want to know what the conditions were. And it's well-known that in the event of a tie in a bet, both of you are losers and have to fulfill all of the conditions."

"Since when?" Sasori asked venomously.

"Since I was a kid. And, since this is *my* village, what I think goes, now doesn't it?" Pein knew he

had won. Neither Sasori or Deidara could argue now without blatantly disobeying him. "And if you're both so eager to get out of this, I'd *really* like to know what you had bet with. Please enlighten us."

-.-.-

"I hate him."

"*You're* the one who brought dresses into it, Deidara," Sasori replied wearily. As if they hadn't had this conversation twenty times thus far.

"We're never betting again, are we?" Deidara asked flatly.

"Never again."

They had managed to skate away from some of the conditions, mainly the art and Hinata related things, since Kakuzu and Kisame cracked up once they heard about the dress condition. At least Sasori didn't have to wear his hair any differently, unlike Deidara. Even so, this was going to be a *long* day.

"You shouldn't be complaining, though. You've cross-dressed several times before," Sasori muttered with a scowl.

"Not in a *dress*. Usually it's with a kimono, yeah."

"Because that is *so* much different, Deidara."

"...You know, your hair is probably long enough for some little pigtails—"

"*No*. That wasn't part of the bet. This is bad enough as it is."

"I don't see what you two are whining about so much. You'd think you were about to be sacrificed or something," Hinata broke in, trying her best to sound irritable. But every time she looked at the two Akatsuki members, she couldn't help but laugh. She was biting her lip trying to stop the giggles even now.

"I don't see *you* in a dress," Sasori replied tersely.

"I don't see how that matters. It's your fault for making a bet on something as stupid as a fighting tournament, anyway." She paused thoughtfully, in the middle of finishing braiding Deidara's hair. Truthfully, it had only been an hour since they'd put on the dresses; it had taken that long to get most of Deidara's complaining out of the way and doing his hair. At least they didn't have to wear makeup. "Besides, you both look—beautiful." She had almost used the word 'adorable', which she probably would have gotten beheaded for. As it was, she was toeing the line.

Sasori was secretly glad that he wasn't going through it alone, though. Deidara would probably distract anyone from looking at him too long. The death glare probably deterred its fair share of people, too. Except Hinata, who was absolutely infatuated with how they both looked. She even *hugged* Sasori. Hugged him.

Finally, half an hour later when she was done dolling them up, she let them look at themselves in a

mirror.

Sasori wanted to kill himself on the spot.

Even more so when he spotted the flash of a camera as Hinata took a picture of them both. "Oh, this is going in the scrapbook. 'The day Sasori finally learns a bit of humility'," she said cheerfully, grinning at them both.

"I will kill you. I will—" Sasori had to be forcibly restrained by Deidara. He settled for shouting obscenities and descriptive death threats as his partner dragged him out of the room.

"Am I allowed back into the room now—?" Neji cut off when he caught sight of them. For a brief moment, he looked ready to laugh, but quickly masked his expression into one of polite interest. "...Ah."

"Get in there before I kill you, yeah," Deidara snapped.

"Now who's in a bad mood?" Sasori asked, frowning. "At least he wasn't laughing like Hinata-hime was."

"Oh, Sasori, you can't call *me* princess dressed like *that*!" the kunoichi called after them, leaning out of the doorway. She waved goodbye to them as Deidara dragged Sasori off before blood could be spilt.

"Don't be such a spoilsport. At least you still vaguely resemble a guy, yeah," Deidara pointed out, pushing him out the door in front of him, closing it behind him. Part of the deal that Pein had forced upon them was that they had to be in the village for a minimum of two hours. "Come on, at least you look cute, Sasori-hime."

"Deidara, I swear I will kill you before this day is over."

"Ah, and here are my two favorite little artists, all gussied up." Pein had found them early. Sasori buried his face in his hands; he had been hoping to avoid the leader for at least a few more hours. Unfortunately, he must have been waiting for them just outside the tower. Konan was even with him. "I hope this teaches you both a lesson about making bets. They're immoral, after all."

"You're lucky I don't plan a mutiny," Sasori hissed, glaring at him through his fingers.

"You're lucky I don't make you put some makeup on," Pein returned with a smirk.

"I almost feel bad for you, Sasori-san," Konan said dryly. "Deidara-san has had practice dressing like a woman, after all. Several times. But this is a new experience for you, isn't it?"

Deidara bristled, but somehow managed to reign in his temper before he could explode. (Maybe literally.) "And I *still* look more feminine than you, yeah," he said with an innocent smile. It was hard to tell who he was insulting more, himself or Konan, Either way, she looked outraged, and slapped him. Deidara retaliated by trying to pull her hair, and soon it degraded into a catfight.

Pein and Sasori looked on, rather awkwardly. "...Let's take a walk through the village." His tone made it clear he didn't want to be anywhere near Konan while she was so angry. Sasori just nodded sullenly.

He accompanied the leader away from the tower before either fighter could react. Hopefully it'd be somewhat silent, then. Even if Sasori had to put up with Pein's jokes. "Why did you express such an interest in our bet?"

"I need something for stress relief," he replied. "...Where'd you get that dress? It is much too..."

"Lolita?" Sasori supplied sarcastically.

"Yeah, that. But it's not one of Konan's, is it?"

"No. I think Hinata dug it up somewhere in the Akatsuki closet, though. Wherever she got the kimonos for that mission, the one to assassinate the old Rain Lord."

The pair walked steadily towards the wall, then circled around the village on the inside of it. They stopped by the gate, surprised by a small ruckus there. Pein walked up importantly to the group of gate guards, while Sasori hung back, trying to look inconspicuous. "What's going on here?"

"There's some people coming up the path."

"...So?"

"They—They're, uh..."

Sasori edged around the group and peeked out the gate, down the path. He blanched; those were dignitary outfits. "*Pein!* You invited dignitaries here?!" Not only could he believe that he did that *today*, of all days, but why now? He wasn't quite done with the Bijuu jutsu—though it'd only take a 'week or two more', in his words—and the war had been over for a few months now. There was no need for foreign diplomats now, of all times.

"First off, that's Leader-sama to you, Sasori," Pein snapped. Sasori glared sullenly at him. The rest of the group looked at him with wide eyes, apparently realizing he was male for the first time.

"And second, I wasn't expecting them either, for your information. Which countries are they from?"

"I see... red," Sasori looked out the gate again, squinting in the morning light, "Green and blue. Konoha, Kiri and Suna."

"What are *they* doing here...?" Pein asked himself, narrowing his ringed eyes. "Sasori, go get Deidara and Konan. Tell Konan that I ordered her here, and she'll listen to you. You and Deidara return here with her, too. Get Zetsu, too, if you can find him. He and Deidara might need to make a trip to Kumo and Iwa soon..."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: What do these diplomats want with Ame?! They've already won the war, so what could they stand to gain? Pein fields question and man alike, desperately trying to finish the Bijuu jutsu. Meanwhile, Deidara and Zetsu are sent on a trip to Iwa and Kumo to grab the last two Kages for an unprecedented meeting of all of the major players of the world.

Meetings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What are you here for?" None other than Pein met them at the gates. The three Kages shifted nervously, narrowing their eyes. Their escorts shifted as well, though it was to draw weapons and ready themselves for a fight.

"We've come to seek a meeting with you," Danzou replied curtly. He ducked his head low, so the Hokage's hat covered his face. This was embarrassing, no—humiliating. Mortifying. Totally shameful. He felt bad to even *be* the Hokage—his life's dream, nearly—if he had to sacrifice Konoha's respect like this.

"Just you three?" Pein asked mildly, looking between the three leaders. He knew that the Kazekage and Hokage both had died during the war, so these two must have been their successors. He had never met the Mizukage, however. So this was essentially a meeting of strangers. "If it warrants the attention of three of the major villages, then why not the last two?"

Pein was blunt, Danzou noted. He'd have to be careful not to mimic the candor. "Because we've suffered the most in this war."

The ginger-haired leader raised a pierced eyebrow, and the Hokage immediately knew that he made a mistake.

"Not to minimize the losses you've suffered, of course," he added hastily. It was a lame fix, but at least he had fixed it. He didn't need to be getting off to such a bad start right away. "It's just... Iwa was completely out of this war, and Kumo wasn't on the home front."

"Neither was Kiri," Pein remarked with a smirk. The Mizukage bristled, but kept his tongue in check. "Alright, relax. I understand why it is just you three. Though I would like to know what this meeting is for right now before just throwing open my village's gates for three foreign shinobi... and their escorts." He looked at the escorts with disdain, obviously not thinking they were worth his time. However, it just underscored the fact that he realized that even the god of Amegakure might have some trouble with *three* Kages.

"We've come to discuss the future of the shinobi world," the Kazekage replied quietly. Pein nodded thoughtfully.

"Then I should see no reason why Iwa and Kumo should not be included."

"Maybe... after we get a few things settled," Danzou said carefully. "Such as Konoha's uncertain future."

Pein smiled. No, it wasn't even a smile. He was just baring his teeth at them. "Ame is *still* rebuilding. We damaged your Hokage tower—leveled it—and sections of the wall. The rest of it was minor structural damage. You and the Suna forces completely *toted* the city of Ame. Destroyed the Akatsuki tower—again, that could be retribution—massacred all of the civilians and burned their homes, and destroyed most of the residential areas. Not to mention blew up half our village's wall. And Konoha's future is uncertain?"

"We suffered more human losses," Danzou bit out, sneering.

"In sheer numbers, yes. But percentage-wise, Ame suffered more," Pein replied darkly. "If you're trying to gain access to Ame for a meeting with me, you're doing a shitty job of it, Hokage-san."

Danzou chomped down on his tongue to prevent the first retort that came to mind. Pein was right, irritatingly enough. They were supposed to be sucking up, not trading war stories. "I'm sorry," he said, though it nearly killed him.

"Well, this way. I suppose the meeting is where I'll get the details, hmm?" Pein turned and waved them inside the gates, which hastily opened on his command. There were several nervous and wary gate guards, in addition to a blue-haired woman wearing an Akatsuki uniform and two girls in dresses behind her. "But first, you'll need a tour of the village, won't you? Sasori will show you where you'll be staying and all of the places you'll need to see. Won't you, Sasori?"

The redhead, who Danzou just realized was male, gave Pein a withering look. The leader stepped closer to him and hissed, "Consider this payback for the mutiny comment."

"Yes, Leader-sama," Sasori replied curtly. He turned to the dignitaries, and bowed stiffly at the waist. The three Kages and their escorts had no idea what to make of the boy in the dress. "This way, if you'd please."

Danzou then recognized him. He *knew* the name Sasori had sounded familiar. He was one of the Akatsuki members. He glanced towards the blunette and the blonde beside her. That one must be Deidara, and the (very) pregnant woman could only be Konan, Pein's own partner.

It was then that the Hokage regretted coming.

"You just threw Sasori-san to the wolves. They'll recognize him," Konan said once the unexpected diplomats were out of earshot.

"There was no one else handy. Plus he's had years of dealing with foreign shinobi. He can keep his head."

"In the *dress*, though?"

"I'm sure he'll duck out halfway through and change." Pein waved the question off. "But that's beside the point. Konan, I need you here with me. Deidara, go find Zetsu and return to the gate in ten minutes. Pack everything you'll need for a *fast* trip. You don't have time to change, got it?"

"But—"

"Change on the way! Just not now! Time is of the essence!" Konan snapped at him, sending the cross-dressing blonde off. "Okay, now explain, Pein."

"They're going to beg. They must think I'm already done with the Bijuu jutsu, and they're going to beg for their villages. But I need Iwa and Kumo here if we're going to get anything productive done. I've been planning on calling a major meeting like this for some time... but I just hadn't expected it to come so soon."

"But... you're *not* done with the Bijuu jutsu," she said softly.

"We're going to stall them, and I am going to work my ass off on it. I want Madara with me at all times. You, too. I don't trust them."

"What of Zetsu and Deidara?"

"They're going to go fetch the Tsuchikage and the Raikage."

"How long will that take?"

"Zetsu will go ahead and warn them. Deidara should only take a day or two to reach them, and then bring them back. I don't know. I'll ask him. It'll be a week tops."

"So... a week to finish the Bijuu jutsu?"

"At the minimum. Good thing I'm close, huh?" He grinned at her, but her expression remained solemn. "We're just pushing this ahead of schedule is all. There's nothing to be worried about, Konan."

"I'm not worried."

"At least it'll be over and done with before you give birth, right?"

"If you scare me like this again it might not be," she replied sourly, folding her hands over her stomach. "The child will not interfere with anything. I'll make sure of it. You just concentrate on bullying Kages and ruling the world, alright?" She leaned up and gave him a peck on the cheek, something she'd never done in public before. Pein was quite aware of the gate guards looking pointedly in the opposite direction.

At that point, Deidara and Zetsu arrived, backpack slung over the blonde's shoulders haphazardly. Both appeared out of breath. "Yes, Pein-sama?" Zetsu asked, frowning.

"Go to Iwa, and then to Kumo. Deidara, you go in the same order. Meet with the Tsuchikage and Raikage and ask... *order* them to come here. We're having a world meeting and their presences are vital." Pein looked around for some piece of paper, and one of the gate guards eagerly handed a scrap of paper and a pen to him. He scribbled something out, and then ripped the paper in half, folding each of the pieces. "Give this to each of them. That should get you through. Deidara, you're in charge of bringing them here. I want them here in one piece, but I want it to be *fast*, got it?"

"Yes, Leader-sama!" Deidara said with a grin. Pein should have been having second thoughts at that point, but he just brushed them aside.

"Well, what are you waiting for?! Go!" Pein shooed them both away. Zetsu sunk into the ground, while Deidara just spat out what appeared to be a double-winged bird of some sort, and shot off like an arrow into the sky. The leader sighed and ran a hand through his hair, placing the other on his hip. "This... is going to be one hectic week."

-.-.-

The Tsuchikage looked up irritably as a harried chuunin burst into his office. "What," he said evenly, "Could you possibly want *now*?"

"S-Sir, it's—" the chuunin took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, "—a message."

"...A message."

"W-Well—Sh-Shall I just show him in?" the chuunin asked with an uncertain grin. The Tsuchikage furrowed his brow, crossing his arms inside his robe. He nodded slowly. The chuunin stepped aside, admitting the strangest creature he had ever seen. It looked like a cross between a human and a venus flytrap, simply put. But the Tsuchikage was too busy staring at the thing's uniform. Akatsuki.

He knew this day had been coming. Iwa could only stay neutral so long. And ever since the rumors of Akatsuki infiltration in the south a few months ago, he knew the day was a lot sooner than he'd hoped. The Akatsuki ninja stepped into his office, inclining his head slightly. "*The leader of the Akatsuki would like a meeting with you,*" one half of his face rasped.

"I... see."

After a moment of silence, the other half, the white half, said simply, "Now."

The Tsuchikage stood up, clearing his throat. The chuunin quickly departed. "Of course. I'll have the arrangements made for the Akatsuki leader to stay here, whenever he arrives—"

"*You misunderstand me,*" his black half spat. His white half continued more peacefully, "I meant, he requests your presence in Amegakure."

"Oh. ...I see. That can be arranged as well," he fielded. "I'll gather a convoy in the morning—"

"*You are repeatedly misunderstanding me,*" the black half said with a distinct lack of patience. The white half's mouth curved into a small, innocent smile. "I'm sorry, but again, we are butting heads, Tsuchikage-san."

He was outraged by the lack of proper title, and was actually debating whether or not to attack this freak of nature. It wouldn't be wise, but Iwa had been the only nation undamaged by the war. They were still at full strength.

"Your Akatsuki escort will arrive tonight, sometime towards midnight, I'm guessing. You'll know it's him from the uniform, if all else fails." The Tsuchikage had no idea what *that* was supposed to mean. But he just narrowed his eyes. The white half continued calmly, "You will accompany him to Kumo, where he'll also pick up the Raikage. Then you'll both return to Amegakure. *The leader of the Akatsuki has called a meeting of the world's main players, and you're lucky enough to have made the cut.*"

If the supposed escort was arriving this soon, he must have departed some time ago. This plant-man must have been sent ahead as a messenger. At least the Akatsuki had that much tact. "..."

"The leader also said to give you this." The man produced a scrap of paper, rolled together to form a messy scroll. He tossed it at the Iwa leader, who deftly caught it and was reading it before he could continue. His face slowly drained of blood, and he just looked back up at him fearfully.

"I... I'll come," he whispered.

"I'm glad we can count on your presence," the white half said with a razor sharp smile.

And with that, he disappeared into the stone ground beneath him.

The Tsuchikage sunk back into his chair, putting a hand to his forehead. He had broken out in a cold sweat. The message had quite simply said that the Bijuu jutsu was ready, and it was time to discuss that. It was a thinly veiled threat.

That night, there was an uproar as something was spotted in the skies. As it neared, the Tsuchikage clenched his jaw and ordered the panicking masses not to continue panicking. The clay bird landed on the Kage's tower's roof, stretching its four wings idly. A blonde that half the village must recognize from sight alone slid down from the thing's neck, stretching his own arms for a few moments. The Tsuchikage tried not to kill the man on principle.

"Yeah... it's been awhile since I've been here, yeah," the Akatsuki member remarked to no one in particular. "Well, should we? We're kind of on a schedule, and I was ordered just to pick you up and go, yeah."

"It's nice to see you, too, Deidara."

Deidara peered at him intently, cocking his head to the side. "Am... Am I suppose to recognize you, yeah? You must realize that I was a kid when I left, and all you normal Iwa-nin look the same to me at this point."

"Oh, no, we've never met. I'd just recognize the man who destroyed the village any day."

"Really? I thought I had only destroyed half of it." The blonde perked up with a grin. "Well, enough small talk. I *really* got to get to Kumo, and I don't know how long it'll take. Let's go, yeah."

The Tsuchikage realized what the plant-man meant, earlier, then. He just clambered on top of the clay creature behind the Iwa missing-nin, keeping his Kage hat on as they lifted into the air with the hum of two pairs of wings. He assumed it was supposed to be some kind of hummingbird, though the beast could hardly be called that. He'd have a few days to figure out what kind of bird bomb he was riding on, though.

"I'd like to request a meeting with the Raikage." Before he had even asked, the doors were opened for him. Zetsu enjoyed his fearsome appearance and Akatsuki uniform now more than ever. It was such a handy combination to have.

He stepped into the Raikage's office, looking around him with a polite interest. Once that was out of the way, he locked his yellow eyes on the woman sitting behind the desk. She stared evenly back at him, seemingly unperturbed by his appearance and uniform both. "Please, sit," she said simply, gesturing to a chair.

"*I'd rather stand, thanks,*" his black half retorted before he could stop it. His white half cleared his throat, and tossed the scroll from Pein onto her desk. She took it in two fingers gently, unrolling it and reading it as he explained. "The leader of the Akatsuki and Amegakure has requested a meeting with you. All of the other Kages will be present at this. It will be vital that you come as well."

"...Of course," the Raikage replied simply, rolling up the scroll once she was done with it. "I'll be there as soon as I can be."

"Your escort will arrive in a day or two," Zetsu replied simply. "You may recognize him. The blonde with the flight capabilities."

"...Of course," she said dryly. "Because though I haven't been outside of my village in years, I recognize all of the Akatsuki members by such vague terms."

Zetsu couldn't help but grin. So here was a woman who knew how to handle herself. "I had just assumed that you would recognize one of the ones who assassinated the last Raikage."

"Oh, I wasn't being sarcastic. Just like I recognize you from the same mission."

Zetsu blinked and averted his eyes with something almost like uneasiness. "*Right.*"

"In a day or two, you say?"

"Yes. He had to stop in Iwa to pick up the Tsuchikage first, and he can't travel as fast as I can."

"Understood. Is there anything else I need to know?"

"*Nothing that comes to mind.*"

"Then I will see you in Amegakure, Akatsuki-san."

"*You know, the last Raikage called us by that, too. He died.*"

"Though I know of your name, I wasn't aware I should mention that without proper introductions. I'm sorry if that's not how you do it in Ame," she replied with a vicious smile.

Zetsu returned it. He could tell, he liked this woman. She was definitely better than the last Raikage. "You'll catch on, once you get there. *See you soon.*"

-.-.-

It was a week before Deidara returned. He returned with two travel-worn and windblown Kages, but at least he retrieved them. Pein greeted them with more courtesy he gave the other three; after all, the Raikage had assisted him in the last war, and the Tsuchikage was technically neutral in the entire ordeal. He gave them a quick tour of the city, introduced them to Konan and the other Kages, and then left them for the night.

He was *so close* to finishing the Bijuu jutsu it hurt. He could count the time in *days* now. If only he could do it now, finish it so he could answer their questions and not have to lie to them... He'd give the Tsuchikage and Raikage two days to rest up. That would be all he could stall without another reason. He'd have to finish the jutsu in that time.

Madara was helping him all he could, but so much of it was just guesswork. Mostly the jutsu itself was complete, but he had to find a way to make sure the thing sealing the Bijuu's power didn't break. If that broke, it would be a one-time use, and then it would also release the demons back into the world. He didn't want that. He'd invested too much for it to be a single use jutsu, and he didn't have time to track them all down once more.

Just create a concrete seal, and he was done. He would be *done*. He had called Sasori in several times for sealing tips—he was the one who used it most often—but even the puppeteer could only

give him so much information without knowing all aspects of the plan. And while Pein trusted his entire Akatsuki, he didn't want to disclose that much information to any one person. (He was even keeping some aspects of it away from Madara.)

It looked like he had several sleepless nights in front of him.

-.-.-

Pein found he wasn't very good at politics. He'd never had a use for them before, instead using shows of force—or force itself—to get where he was today. Now he was stuck in several-hour meetings with five foreigners, trying to talk about something while not really talking about anything at all. It was infuriating. Mostly because he was trying to talk about nothing *while* talking about something while not really talking about anything of importance.

What was worse, was that he was usually too tired to think straight. His chakra was almost always depleted these days, and he hadn't slept in three or four days. He was hardly eating. Mostly he'd just work on the Bijuu jutsu, and then drag himself to these meetings. The Tsuchikage's accent was rather thick, too, and he had trouble understanding him at times. And more than once Pein himself had accidentally lapsed into his first language—he and Konan both spoke a little-known northern Ame dialect as a first—due to fatigue.

On the third day of stupid interviews, Pein decided to ditch. He need a nap and a break in the worst way. That morning, in the tower just before he was set to go meet the dignitaries, he shouted, "Kakuzu—wait, no." Kakuzu would kill them all.

And he needed Madara and Konan with him.

Zetsu would probably either frighten them out of their wits or eat them. ...Or both.

Deidara would blow them up and Hidan would sacrifice them.

Itachi would stare them into submission—which really wasn't a bad thing, but he was too young for proper political talks—and Kisame would just threaten them all with his Samehada.

"Sasori!"

"What could I have possibly done to warrant your attention this time?" the redhead asked, rolling his eyes. He still hadn't forgiven Pein for making him give a tour of Amegakure in a dress.

"I need you to go to the meeting in my stead."

"I don't have a choice in the matter, do I? So I see no point in commenting on the subject."

"Works for me. Just don't betray the Akatsuki and you'll do fine." Hopefully Sasori would have the tact to handle it well. Right now, Pein needed sleep. He somehow made it the three more floors to his own room, and collapsed on the couch. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

-.-.-

"Where's Pein-san?"

"Sick day."

"And you are...?"

"Sasori of the Red Sands, if you must know. But I don't see how knowing who I am will change anything."

"So you're a Suna-nin?"

"How *ever* did you guess?"

Sasori knew he got off to a bad start. But he hadn't volunteered for this job. He just tried to ignore the glares and sat down at Pein's spot, folding his hands on the circular meeting table. He patiently waited for about five seconds for someone else to talk. But Sasori had never been good at waiting.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"Discussing Amegakure's position in the world as opposed to the other villages," the Kazekage replied. "And... what Pein-san decides on doing with that position."

Sasori put a hand against his temple, grumbling, "*Please* tell me he didn't ask for a position as a Kage..."

"No, he didn't. He's hinted at it, but hasn't made any move to declare himself one. Yet."

"You... You're Danzou, aren't you?"

The Hokage looked surprised. "Yes, that is my name."

Sasori smiled thinly. "Your reputation must precede you, then. I've heard some interesting things about you, Danzou-san."

Danzou just scowled. "I see." He must be well aware of what his reputation had been, then. "So are we going to talk about my reputation or the world's crisis?"

"What crisis are you talking about?" Sasori asked innocently.

Danzou paled, and hastily looked away. The Kazekage stepped in to save him. "We are merely referring to the fact that no one group has ever held all nine Bijuu at the same time before. We were... unsure of what else to call such a situation. It is alarming, to say the least."

"To say the least..." he echoed deprecatingly.

"And do you hold the same view of the situation as your leader?" the Tsuchikage asked quietly.

"Of course," Sasori snapped automatically. It was out of line for him to imply that he and Pein didn't see eye to eye, moreover since Pein was the leader of the Akatsuki and Amegakure. They would not be allowed to think that there was any dissension in the ranks. Not that there really was; just petty arguments. Of course, visiting delegates could get the wrong idea with such things...

The meeting lasted five more hours. *Five* hours. Sasori was dragging his feet back to the Akatsuki tower, ready to either collapse or beat his head against something. Maybe both. He had to listen to five hours' worth of political bullshit, and hadn't gotten anywhere with the supposed talks. He was just about to fall asleep—which, in itself, was surprising since he just slept the other day—when

something promptly exploded up a floor or two.

Sasori just sat up, and ground out, "*Deidara*."

As it turned out, though, it wasn't Deidara. He was just as confused as everyone else, especially once they figured out that it wasn't their resident explosives expert. The members who bothered coming out to investigate traveled as a solid group upstairs; there was safety in numbers. Deidara was shunted into the front. Everyone seemed to be operating on the rationale that if he made explosions, he could withstand them if need be.

The blonde shield was nearly bowled over by a soot-covered Pein. Tobi followed him, staggering out as if in a daze. He hastily readjusted his mask when he saw that most of the organization was staring in shock.

"I did it!" Pein crowed triumphantly. "The Bijuu jutsu is done!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The meetings continue...but Pein eventually gets fed up and shares his accomplishment and plans for the world with the visiting dignitaries. What are their reactions? How will the world take such a revelation?

Political Bullshit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The political bullshit continued, regardless of whether or not Pein was done. It just meant he got more sleep, was less cranky, and had a bit of hope. With those things, he managed to continue it for at least another week, without letting on that he had finished the jutsu right under their noses. There was nothing they could do now. They were literally at his mercy.

He had decided ahead of time that he'd spare Kumogakure. They had helped him capture the Nibi, after all, in addition to taking out the Kiri forces that probably would have overwhelmed Ame in the war. The Raikage was the closest thing he had to an ally in the room.

Iwa, he was on the fence about.

They had done absolutely nothing, one way or another. Neutrality was something Pein honestly wasn't used to. He decided to reserve judgment on that village. (Though he didn't like the Tsuchikage himself.)

Kiri, too, he was a little unsure about. True, they had tried to fight against him in the war, but they never managed to. And they didn't resist when they went to Kiri to capture the Sanbi. Truthfully, the Mizukage acted more neutral about the entire thing than the Tsuchikage, but that might have been a defense mechanism. He decided to reserve judgment on that, too.

Konoha and Suna, though... they were screwed. The main problem Pein had with them is which to do first. Konoha had put up such a fuss about the Kyuubi, but Suna had as well about the Ichibi. And both had viciously attacked him and his village in the war. Which would die first, then? Konoha, or Suna? He couldn't decide.

That was what Pein was thinking about during most of the meetings these days. He was just waiting for something. He didn't know what. Just something to set off the time bomb they were all aware of. He rested his cheek on his fist, elbow on the top of the table. He tried his best to at least *look* interested, but he couldn't help it if his eyelids drooped. Political bullshit, all of it.

Which to kill first... he wondered carelessly. Maybe it would be best to erase Konoha from the map first. They had a lower population, and had been more troublesome in the past. Less deaths, bigger impact. That sounded nice. Because Pein was not needlessly cruel. He just knew he needed to make an example out of *someone*. Maybe Suna would back down and beg for its life once Konoha was reduced to ashes.

But then again, he didn't know *exactly* what this Bijuu jutsu would do. It'd probably be easier to contain, if it got out of hand, if it was in the desert. Plus it was farther from Ame itself, if an incident *should* arise. And Suna shinobi did have a history of being stubborn jackasses...

What am I thinking about? Nothing's going to happen. I've got the sealing down, and already we've hunted down the Bijuu once before. Without Jinchuuriki, they don't know their own strength. Practically house pets. Nothing will go wrong... he assured himself, eyelids drooping a bit lower. *Konoha, or Suna...?*

"—and are you even listening, Pein-san?"

"Mm, of course," he replied automatically.

Konan, beside him, gave a little titter. She probably knew exactly what was going through his head, and that of course he wasn't listening.

The Kazekage looked like he would dearly like to ask what the last thing he said was, but probably deemed it too immature and just moved on instead. "Then, as I was saying, a pact between the five great countries could undoubtedly benefit the world at large..."

Pein blinked slowly, trying to stay awake. *Konoha or Suna?* he asked himself for the umpteenth time. He honestly couldn't decide. Maybe he'd ask Madara or Konan later. Or a vote, in the Akatsuki. That'd be interesting, what the members chose. He made a note to do that later tonight. If they were awake and not ready to bite his head off by then. A few of them had gotten into the habit of drinking, to supposedly 'celebrate' the completion of the Bijuu jutsu.

Konoha... or... Suna...?

Beside him, Konan shifted uncomfortably in her seat, trying to find a better spot. He had noticed that she had been doing that a lot lately. "Are you nesting?" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. Underneath the table, his shin received a very nasty kick. Pein bit his lip to keep from laughing and looked away, trying to pretend like he was still indulging in the Kages pleas.

So... which will it be? Konoha, or Suna?

-.-.-

"You're drunk; get off of me."

"Oh, be nice!"

"You can hardly stand up straight yourself, princess."

"Shut up, you're just jealous."

"Of what?"

"That Deidara is leaning against *me*."

"You're both idiots."

"I can feel a headache coming on..." Neji groaned, resting his forehead against the nearest building wall. It was cool to the touch, and slightly damp. It felt good, but only for a few seconds. "Will you all please be quiet? And Hinata, you are *never* drinking again."

"I-I only had two glasses!" she retorted in a high voice, her cheeks red.

Neji, too, had only gotten a buzz. Deidara, nowhere close. He couldn't even stand. He was currently being supported between Hinata and Sasori. Neji couldn't tell if he had passed out already or not.

"You're underage."

"So are you," she shot back.

"Both of you, be quiet. You can have your lover's spat *later* when we're not trying to drag the idiot home. I hope he dies of alcohol poisoning..."

"You'll have no such luck," Neji replied. Sasori nodded wearily in acceptance of that fact.

"You're *really* pretty, you know that?" Deidara slurred, rubbing the top of his head against Hinata's cheek, not unlike a cat. "My Bya-chan is *so* pretty."

It was hard to tell who was more angry. Sasori dropped him at that point, and the already tipsy Hyuuga girl tumbled to the ground with Deidara. Neji looked at Sasori in surprise for the move. Of course, he'd always had his suspicions about those two, but he had never wanted to ask. He just found it interesting that Sasori could somehow be so *open* with it like that and no one would catch on. Hinata certainly wouldn't.

"You're a jerk, Sasori!" she said shrilly, jabbing her finger into his chest.

"And you're a bitch when you're drunk." She looked as if she'd been slapped. Neji stepped in at that point, pulling Sasori away from her by the hair.

"*That* is enough, Sasori. Go pick up your blonde and let's just get home before we kill each other. And no more speaking that cruelly to Hinata." Drunk shinobi were not safe, or fun, things.

When they got back to the tower, they were surprised to find most of the Akatsuki members in the room that could be called the living room. Actually, with the addition of Deidara and Sasori, the entire organization was there. Even though it seemed as if neither Deidara nor Hidan could stand, much less talk.

"Ah, Sasori. I've been curious as to your opinion. Konoha or Suna?" Pein asked without elaboration.

"For what?" the redhead asked, feeling cross. It was bad enough he had to deal with drunk kids, but now Pein? The leader hadn't been getting many brownie points lately for his behavior towards him.

"Which to make an example out of."

"Konoha."

"I would have guessed you'd say Suna..."

"No, Sasori-danna *hates* Leaf ninja," Deidara piped up, surprisingly coherently. He only slurred half of it.

"Interesting," Pein said, looking at the drunk blonde flopped over the edge of the couch. "Deidara, which would you pick."

"Su-na," he replied, stressing each syllable. Sasori looked at him in slight surprise. Deidara noted this and burst out, "They tried to kill me! Twice! Three times—more! I don't know how many. Just... a lot."

"Well then, that's everyone. That comes to four for Suna, five for Konoha, and then myself, who is not voting." Pein stood up, planting his fists on his hips. "Looks like it's Konoha going down, then."

Sasori shrugged, and then picked Deidara up to put him to bed. He wished violently that his partner would have a hangover in the morning. Hinata, too. Maybe even Neji.

-.-.-

The meetings continued as normal. They were all unsuspecting that Konoha's fate had been decided. And if Suna didn't cooperate afterward, they would be eliminated as well. So would anyone else who didn't ally themselves with Ame. And then, once the other villages got the message, all war would stop. And without war, shinobi would slowly die out in the other villages, aside from Amegakure, which would be prosperous and peaceful.

Perfect.

But the meetings still continued.

Pein had tried to figure out how to sleep with his eyes open. But ever since he was a kid, he had never been able to get the hang of it. It might have been because of the Rinnegan, but he wasn't sure. So he just felt his eyelids droop again as the Hokage stressed the importance of inter-village ties. It was amazing, really. They were begging, sounding high and mighty while doing so. He supposed only politics could create such an effect.

But he felt a bit of pride at the fact that they were *begging*. He had come so far, since that day in the Rain when Jiraiya had found the three of them... Now he had even the great Konoha at his feet, begging for mercy. All five of the villages were at his mercy. The entire *world* was at his mercy.

It was then that he decided that *this* was the perfect time.

"Pein," Konan whispered warningly.

He just ignored her and waited for a lull in the talks. Then, he stood up, spread his hands, and slowly placed them palm-down on the table. "Are we all done? I think we're done."

The five looked at him expectantly, almost reluctantly. Beside him, Konan shifted uneasily.

"I've let all of you have your say, and I have honestly listened to it. Some of it. But I think that enough is enough. I'm tired of all of this crap about peace and inter-village relations. You pompous fools have *no idea* what that really means. None of you have known peace in your lifetimes. Neither have I. But the difference is that *I* wasn't fighting in those wars. I was defending myself, my country, my people. All of you are shameless war hawks, trying to boost your own economy with the strongest shinobi.

"I grew up in the war before last. It was painful, and it was hard. Konan and I were both orphaned by that war, and were almost killed more times than I could count. And we were the lucky ones. And what did you all do? You were either fighting in it, trying to kill as many enemies as you could for the glory, nevermind the fact that they were genin or chuunin or even civilians, or you were back in your home village, sitting on your ass playing with the pawns that were lives. You all have always done that. All leaders have, to some degree...

"But the point is still there. None of you know what a war can really *do*. You don't know what it does to families, to civilians, to children, to shinobi. You're just the hands guiding the war, safe behind the lines. I do know. That's made me strong, and that's why I'm here today, telling you all of this. And it's because of all of these horrible wars, and how shinobi thrive off of them, that I've had to do all of this." Pein paused, and took a deep breath, closing his eyes. He reopened them

fiercely, trying to stare each of the Kages down.

"That's why I'm eradicating war."

No one said anything. Konan shifted again, looking down at her lap.

The ginger-haired man took another breath. Then he continued. "Unlike what most of you think, or thought, this jutsu I've created out of the power of all nine Bijuu is not a weapon of war. It is a weapon for peace. I only plan on using it once or twice, and hope that its reputation will stop me from using it again after that. With the threat of total annihilation hanging over your heads, you won't fight. None of you will. Because you'd like to save lives, instead of taking, if given the choice. This is that choice.

"War is going to stop. Shinobi villages will die out, because they thrive on that conflict. Ame will remain strong, even in times of peace. We will take care of the world in your absence. It will begin a peaceful era."

Danzou quietly stood up, hands folded in his sleeves. "Pein-san, you said you will only use this jutsu once or twice. On whom, for what reasons?"

Pein met his gaze levelly. "On Konohagakure. The city itself. To make an example of it, and to take out the vicious, cruel shinobi that inhabit it, like you. And if necessary, any other villages that stand up to me."

Silence. No, not even silence. It was a complete vacuum of sound. It should have been a warning to every man and woman present, but somehow they all ignored it. It stretched on and on, everyone looking at either Danzou or Pein. Only Konan was looking away.

Danzou slowly—it seemed slow, but the whole world seemed to be moving slow at that point—drew a kunai with a blast note from his sleeve. He pulled back his arm to throw it, just as the nearest two—the Mizukage and the Tsuchikage—stood up. To either stop him or help him, it was unknown.

Pein saw what he was going to do. He knew he would aim for Konan, because any sane man would do that at this point. Go for the other's weakness. Basic shinobi training.

But instead, Danzou simply dropped the weapon onto the table. It hit the polished wood with a clatter, the blast note limply sitting there. Danzou then fell back into his seat, looking decades older. "I know I cannot stop you at this point. It's too late to stop you, Pein. Konoha is going to die proudly, with its head held high. You cannot take away our spirit of fire."

"I hadn't expected to," Pein allowed, dropping his arms to the sides. "I wouldn't hope to."

The meetings ended, just like that. Pein glanced at the kunai with the blast note, which was still sitting there harmlessly. The Kages slowly filed out, utterly defeated. No one else said anything. They would undoubtedly return to their own villages now, and tell them the news. Whether it would be interpreted as good or bad was up to the people, now.

Konan and Pein were left alone. "That was... nerve wracking," he admitted, exhaling the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

"To say the least," she replied tersely. "Nice speech."

"What's with that tone?" he asked, taken by surprise.

"Nothing."

"Something's wrong. What is it?" Pein pressed, sitting down beside her. "Konan, we just... we just *won*. Completely. Shouldn't you be happy?"

"I *am* happy. Can't you tell?"

"Something's wrong. What's wrong?"

Konan turned to him, sneering. "Oh, nothing. Just the fact that my water broke half an hour ago and I've been having contractions since then. Do you know how uncomfortable it is to be sitting while having them?!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Oh, Pein, you're so smooth with the ladies. Konan gives birth! Is it a boy or girl? What is the baby's name? How will the rest of the village-and Akatsuki-take this?

What He's Fighting For

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata paced. Deidara watched her. It was something she didn't do often, but now she couldn't help it. She was wringing her hands, too, and kept glancing up at the clock. It had been an hour since Pein had showed up and told them all that Konan was in labor.

"Who's the father? Hinata-hime or Leader-sama?" Sasori asked wryly. Contrary to Hinata's frazzled nerves, Pein was apparently trying to drink himself into a coma. Itachi had wisely taken away the alcohol after the third or fourth cup of the strongest stuff they had. And Pein did not have Kakuzu's constitution or size; he was lucky to be standing. In fact, he was lucky his liver hadn't committed suicide by now. It was probably sheer force of will that kept him upright and still functioning.

"Shut up, Sasori," both Hinata and Pein said in unison with similar snap.

Most of the members were out in the hospital lobby, in varying states of panic. Mostly Hinata was doing the panicking, but that was beside the point. Only Konan, Tobi and Zetsu were missing. Tobi was apparently playing doctor for Konan for reasons Hinata couldn't fathom—and might have contributed to her anxiety—and Konan was, of course, the one giving birth. Zetsu had been sent off on gate guard duty, to make sure the dignitaries left. They didn't want foreign shinobi, especially Kage-level, in the village right now. Nor did they want Zetsu to catch the scent of the amniotic fluid or blood. That might make life interesting for awhile, if he had.

Pein was standing stock still, just staring at the door that Konan would come out. Hopefully with a child. He wasn't allowed in the delivery room. Kunoichi were usually violent in labor; more than once an unfortunate man had had his hand, arm, or even neck broken by an angered woman. Even Pein didn't want to venture that close to her right now. Maybe later, once the shouting stopped.

Most of the other members were lazing around. Except Hidan, who was quietly bleeding on the linoleum. He had made a joke about sacrificing the baby, and they had to drag him away from Pein before he could work out a way to kill the immortal. Right now he was bound and gagged, just to make sure it didn't happen again. Occasionally Kakuzu would prod him with his toe to make sure he was still conscious.

Itachi was watching the clock with an intensity that frightened most of the other members. He hadn't said a word, either. Kisame was the one sitting nearest to him, and even that was on a separate couch in the waiting room. The swordsman himself was just leafing through one of the old magazines, occasionally sighing in boredom.

Deidara was still watching Hinata pace, with an interest that one usually reserved for watching a fight. He seemed curious as to why she was so nervous, especially when it wasn't even *her* baby. She just ignored most of his questions, and continued pacing. Sasori sat beside him, leaning casually on his shoulder, pretending to be dozing so the others would leave him alone.

"How long do these things normally take?" Kisame asked, breaking the silence in the waiting room. (Aside from that, you could still hear Konan shouting hoarsely in the delivery room.)

"Anywhere from an hour to ten," Kakuzu replied, nudging Hidan's head with his foot again.

There was a collective groan.

"Ten *hours* of this, yeah?" Deidara asked in disbelief. "It's a kid. It doesn't take ten hours for her to get it out of her body."

"Well, what if it's twins? Did anyone bother to check?" Kisame asked, flipping another page in the magazine. "I don't think anyone did since Kabuto, and that kid's been dead for some time." He didn't see the nasty glare Hinata sent him.

"Think of what a mood she'll be in when she's done."

"She'll most likely be too tired to care. Or maybe she'll skip that and go right into the nurturing phase," Sasori said.

"How long has it been?" Deidara whined.

"About... an hour and a half."

-.-.-

Over three hours later, the yelling finally stopped. Several heads, Pein's included, lifted in hope. But nothing else happened. "She probably yelled herself hoarse," he muttered, turning back to the wall he was having a staring contest with. "I wonder if I can go in there now—" He stood up.

"No, you're too tense," Kakuzu snapped. "You're radiating tension, and it's been grating on my nerves. She'd probably have a heart attack if you went in there."

Pein looked like he'd been punched in the gut, and sat back down. He was surprisingly docile, considering the situation.

Another hour passed, bringing the count up to six. Pein was literally banging his head against the wall, and Kakuzu had to lead him back to the nearest couch and ground him there with a firm hand on his shoulder. They were about to have Itachi put him to sleep, if need be.

Hinata was still pacing, combing her fingers through her long hair to try to calm herself down. It was then that the door opened—the one leading outside. Neji walked in, much to the surprise of many of the other Akatsuki members. He looked at them all, and then finally decided to go sit by Sasori, who was flipping idly through a magazine.

"Sorry I'm late," Neji mumbled, running a hand through his hair, "No one thought to inform me of this."

Sasori ducked his head guilty, trying not to laugh. So *that's* what he had forgotten...

So with their numbers now up one, the group continued to wait. Pein continued to sit in a stupor, mostly sobered up by the situation. Hinata continued to pace.

A nurse, at one point, walked in and tried to tell them to leave, that visiting hours were over. She just took one look at the uniforms and turned, walking away without saying a word to them.

No one looked up when Tobi appeared beside Pein, seemingly out of thin air. He was adjusting his mask and his hair seemed messier than normal, too. "Uh—"

"Well?"

"Umm, she want to see you," Tobi said quietly, and vanished once more. None of the other members batted an eye, either used to it or too bored to care. It was hard to say. Pein got up robotically, and just turned and walked into the delivery room's doors. They swung shut quietly behind him.

"Who do you think will start screaming first, Konan or Pein?" Kisame asked casually.

"Pein," most of the members agreed.

Instead, there was silence. Just the faint beeping of medical machinery, and the clicking of Hinata's sandals on the tile below. Nothing else. Definitely not any screaming.

-.-.-

"You wake him and I will castrate you," was the first thing Konan said to him. Pein just nodded dumbly, standing in the doorway. She was sitting up in the hospital bed, looking more tired than he had ever seen her before. Her hair was down and her makeup was ruined by sweat (and maybe a few tears), and the stud in her lower lip had either been taken out or left behind somewhere. Konan looked up at him, a few stray blue hairs falling into her lidded eyes. There was a sheen on her skin, a thin coat of sweat from the effort of labor.

In her arms, there was a bundle. It was wrapped up in several blankets rather sloppily, probably last minute. A tiny, pink face peeked out, eyes tightly shut. The infant already had a mop of dark orange hair peeking out from under the blanket, curling over his forehead. His mouth was on his mother's breast, suckling greedily. Konan absently stroked a lock of her child's hair out of his eyes, smiling faintly.

It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

"...Him," was all Pein could say. He just continued standing in the doorway, staring at them both. Madara was nowhere to be found, probably out fielding questions (or so he hoped). They were alone with the beeping machines.

"Him," Konan confirmed with a brisk nod.

"..." Pein looked down at his hands for a moment, and then back up at her. "Him," he repeated again, with an edge of wonder. "It's... a boy."

"Yes, *he* is." The leader of the Akatsuki just continued staring at her. Konan sighed, and shrugged as lightly as she could without disturbing the feeding baby. "How long has it been?"

"Seven hours and twenty-three minutes," he replied automatically. Not that he'd been counting.

She groaned, rolling her eyes. "I swear, if you ever put me through that again, I will kill you. If you think you've felt pain in your life, try going through seven hours and twenty-three minutes of labor."

Pein couldn't help but chuckle. *That* was the Konan he knew. He took a hesitant step closer, though still near the door. Why, he didn't know. Just in case he had to make a quick getaway. "I'll put it on my to do list."

"Good," she replied softly, turning back to the infant in her arms. "He has your hair..."

"It's darker than mine," Pein replied automatically, looking up as he pulled a lock out from his scalp so he could double check. "I had been hoping it—he—would have your hair, though..."

"I like your hair. Blue hair isn't exactly fun to grow up with, you know," she said reproachfully, glaring up at him.

"That won't matter. This kid will grow up where no one will tease him about having blue—or orange—hair. Not like us."

Konan didn't reply, and instead just turned down to her son again. Pein took another, hesitant, step forward. And then another. Pretty soon, he was standing at her bedside, looking down at the two. Still beautiful. This, *this* is what he'd been fighting for.

"Have you named him?" Pein asked quietly.

"I was waiting for you. I created him, you get to name him."

"*We* created him. As you've reminded me several times, I had a part in that. So you get a part in naming him."

"You pick the name."

Pein saw he wasn't going to win this so bluntly. So he just thought back to what she had said, almost a month ago. For a son, what was that name... "Seishirou."

Konan smiled at the name, knowing he had picked it just because she had said it. Then, the smile slowly transformed into a grin. It was the first real grin he had seen on her face since they were kids. "Seishirou, then."

"Does... Does he have the Rinnegan?" Pein had to ask. He had to, to get it out of the way. He had to know.

"I don't know," she replied simply, grin lost. "Babies don't open their eyes for about a week or so."

"Oh." So he had a name, and Pein's hair. But he didn't know about his eyes. Finally, the child—Seishirou—finished eating, and made a contented little sound. Konan pulled her shirt back down primly, and then offered the bundle up to her partner. Pein blinked, and took a step backward. "What."

"Do you want to hold your son?" she asked.

"I don't think that's the best idea."

"Come on, hold him. You know you want to," she said slyly, smirking. "How could you not want to hold this adorable, chubby little baby?"

"I see the maternal instincts have already kicked in," he noted. The blunette glared at him, but she couldn't even invest some proper scorn into it like she normally did. "I just... don't..." He trailed off as the bundle was pushed into his arms. Now he had to hold him, unless he wanted to drop their son. Which, of course, was *not* what he wanted to do. He'd rather get eaten by the Kyuubi.

"See? It's not that hard. I think a big, strong man like you can handle a little four kilo baby."

"He's four kilos? Is that normal?"

"Pein, he's fine. Our son is normal, and healthy, and cute, and fine."

"Okay, now you've said 'adorable' *and* 'cute' in the last ten minutes. What kind of drugs did they put you on?" he asked shrewdly, just to hide his elation at getting to hold such a tiny, fragile, innocent creature. Seishirou would have the best life possible. He'd make sure of it.

-.-.-

A week later, Pein hit a brick wall. Konan had spent the two following days in the hospital, and then the last five in her room, mostly alone with Seishirou. She only permitted Pein—and Madara, once—to visit her. It was a week later when she finally came downstairs to let the other members (and the two Hyuuga) to see Seishirou for the first time.

The proverbial brick wall that Pein hit was reached just when she was coming down the stairs. She said it in such an offhand manner that he knew. "Oh, his eyes opened this morning."

"Rinnegan?"

"...Yes. But they're gorgeous."

"I see," he said shortly, and led her downstairs for the introduction. He didn't know how to react, really. In some small way, he knew it had been coming. But then, a larger, niggling side took over. "Wait, so the kid—Seishirou, he has my hair and eyes? What did he get from you?"

"I don't know. I'm thinking maybe my origami skills. He was playing with a butterfly earlier."

"He can play?"

Konan rolled her eyes. "Yes, he can. It's not like he was playing tag with it, Pein. Just chewing on it and giggling. That's how babies play."

"Because you're such an expert..." he grumbled. "And here I was hoping he'd look like you."

"This way he can grow up to be handsome and strong like his father. ...Maybe I lucked out and he got my personality, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She didn't reply, since she had finally gotten to the floor below. All eyes were on her, for a moment—and then went down to the bundle in her arms. It was time for the rest of the Akatsuki to meet Seishirou. And Konan, blunt as ever, just nodding towards the infant and said, "Boys, this is Seishirou. Sei-chan. Touch him and I will kill you."

No one got up to try to hold the baby.

Konan walked around the room, introducing Seishirou to each member in turn (nevermind the fact that there was no way the infant would ever remember them). "This is Kakuzu-san. He's very strong and gets annoyed very easily. And this is his partner, Hidan-san. He swears a lot—which *he will be stopping*—and likes to whine."

The pair would have undoubtedly started a ruckus, but Pein, who had been shadowing Konan, stared them back down into their seats. Hidan didn't do so much as utter a peep. Kakuzu, however,

asked quietly, "How's this going to interfere with the schedule?"

"Of what?"

"Bijuu-powered extermination."

"We'll just play it by ear," Pein said lowly, glancing at Konan's back. She was busy introducing the baby to Itachi and Kisame, and either didn't hear him or ignored him.

"And this is Itachi-san. You'll be lucky if you ever evict a single kind word from him in your life, Sei-chan. And this man right here is Kisame-san. He looks like a shark, but ignore that. He's a swordsman."

"How come he didn't get any mean remarks?" Hidan whined.

"Looking like a shark is a good thing now?" Kisame barked back.

"And this is Sasori-san. He's always cranky but he's probably the least likely to be a bad influence. And this is his partner, Deidara-san. He makes toys come to life and makes them explode for fun. Oh, and this is Zetsu-san. He looks like a plant, but again, ignore that, Sei-chan." As if the infant was going to make a comment upon it. "He eats people. And this is Tobi-san, who is... hyper."

Seishirou stared at Tobi's bright orange mask with solemn eyes, and then cooed at him. Tobi looked away, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "Is that a good thing, Konan-san?"

"I assume," she replied curtly. The blunette woman looked around, and then said, "I'm surprised Hinata-san isn't here. I thought she would be eager to see Sei-chan..."

"She'll be here eventually, I'm sure," Sasori replied.

"You know, Itachi-sama had said that today was the day Konan would finally give in and show everyone the baby." That was how Kisho had chosen to wake Hinata up that morning. That, and with a live snake in her bed.

Neji had had to dispose of the snake for her, making sure to put Kisho out as well, while Hinata frantically tried to get ready. It was only after two tries she got an outfit that matched. "Where are you going in such a hurry?" he asked. He was slightly amused that she was so panicky about something, but mostly intrigued by why she was.

"To s-see Konan-senpai's baby! She—She was going to let the Akatsuki see him today—" she cut herself off as she pulled a shirt over her head.

"I wasn't aware you were officially an Akatsuki member now."

"I'm not, but—oh, you know. I'm like... honorary."

"Isn't the child's name Seishirou?" Neji asked, mostly to see her reaction. He knew full well that Hinata did *not* know that little tidbit. He himself only found it out from Sasori.

"Wha—? Is it?!" Predictably, she paused in mid-step, staring at him with large eyes. "How do you

know this?!"

"Oh, you know," he replied vaguely, waving a hand in the air. "One hears things."

"Well, then, come on!"

"Huh?" Neji was suddenly tossed a shirt to put on as she was pulling on her sandals. "Why am I getting dragged into this?"

"You should want to see the baby anyway. We can go together." That was how Hinata successfully dragged Neji out of the apartment with her. She continued pulling him after her all the way to the tower, much to his annoyance and amusement both. Usually she wasn't so insistent, to say the least.

"Konan's not here," Sasori said as they walked through the door. Hinata frowned and halted, her hand still tight on Neji's wrist.

"What do you mean?"

"She just left, twenty or so minutes ago. On a walk with Pein and Seishirou."

Just as Sasori was finishing his sentence, Deidara practically flew down the stairs from the sound of her entrance. He tackled her in a hug, swinging her around for good measure. "Bya-chan!"

"Dei-Deidara-kun!" she squeaked, startled by the sudden display of affection. When he finally set her down, and she had regained her breath, Hinata asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"Nope, yeah."

"That's a contradiction," Neji pointed out. Deidara spared him a withering look, and then returned his attention eagerly to Hinata.

"Can't I hug my Bya-chan?" he asked with a pout.

"Of course you can—Deidara-kun, put me down!"

"Come on, you still owe me a date, yeah." Neji frowned, but just huffed and tried his best to ignore the pair. He knew they really didn't mean anything by it. It was all playful, it was all playful, it was all playful...

"But—I had wanted to see Seishirou-chan!"

"It's Sei-chan, according to Konan. At least, that's how she's introducing him," Sasori commented dryly.

"Sei-chan? That's so cute!" Hinata cooed, beaming. "What does he look like?"

"Orange hair, a little darker than Leader-sama's. Rinnegan, too. A very quiet kid, thankfully."

"He seems to like Uchiha's ponytail, too, yeah," Deidara added with a snicker. "It took ten minutes to detach him from it."

Even Neji had to smirk at the mental image that created. Of course, then he realized that maybe it was best to keep his hair away from the child, if they would ever meet. He wasn't exactly looking forward to it—he could only stand children of a certain age or older—but he wouldn't be adverse to it. As long as Seishirou didn't pull his hair, he'd be fine with the baby.

"Niisan..." Hinata started, looking at him.

The prodigy sighed, and waved her off. "Yes, you may go. I'm not your keeper, Hinata-sama. Just be back before dark or I'll have to come find you," he warned, half serious. Deidara tried to keep a straight face with the warning, but Hinata just nodded gravely.

"Of course. Come on, Deidara-kun!" And with that, the two overly cheerful shinobi were out the door and out into the city. Neji sighed, and sat down on the nearest thing. He laid back on the couch, using his arms for a makeshift pillow.

"It's somewhat alarming how we don't have to worry about those two," he remarked casually.

"Quite," Sasori said shortly. "But if you were to say anything about it, undoubtedly it would just make trouble."

"Yeah... Best to let them be. Even if they'll probably get into trouble out there."

"That's why I'm staying in *here*."

"Good idea."

There had been an assassination attempt.

No one was quite sure who the intended target had been, but it had either been Konan or Seishirou. (After all, no one would be stupid enough to try to assassinate Pein.) The village was put on lock down and high alert, everyone confined to their homes or businesses while the Akatsuki were dispatched to sniff out any other would-be assassins.

In the attempt, no one had gotten hurt. Except, of course, the assassin. Rumor had it—no one who was in the area at the time seemed quite willing to talk about it—that Konan had eviscerated the man before Pein could properly catch him for questioning. She hadn't killed him, though.

It caused nearly as much ruckus as the assassination attempt. In the middle of Amegakure, pressing a crying Seishirou tightly to her chest, paper wings folded defensively around both of them, Konan had demanded that Pein tell her how to use the Bijuu jutsu. She was fully intent on using it to kill the assassin. Pein had refused, and instead dragged the disemboweled, dying man to Itachi. He was the only one not out on assassin patrol. He was put in charge of gathering information by any means possible.

Hinata and Neji had been locked in the Akatsuki tower once the siren started. Pein had burst in the door, put them in charge of guarding Konan and Seishirou, and then took the rest of the Akatsuki (save Itachi) back out with him. Konan glared at the both of them, daring either of them to say anything. Seishirou was still sniffing, probably overwhelmed by all of the excitement.

An hour later, Itachi appeared downstairs. "The man is dead," he announced dispassionately. "I was able to find out very little, considering the circumstances."

"What did you find out?" Neji asked. Konan and Hinata were sitting together on the couch, the older of the two glaring nastily at the two men. Hinata was holding Seishirou. The baby had fallen

asleep a little while ago, thankfully. Konan had finally calmed down as well, until Itachi had brought the news.

"He was from Konoha. ANBU. Danzou had sent him as a desperate, last ditch effort to try to wrest control away from Amegakure."

"Or out of spite," Neji added, shaking his head. Itachi just nodded. "Is that all?"

"More or less. Most of his words were spent in awe of you, Konan-san," Itachi turned to her, face expressionless. "He was quite impressed with your attack, apparently."

She said nothing.

The Akatsuki returned near dawn. Hidan had caught two assassins, Zetsu another. As the sun peeked up over the cliffs, the city was finally allowed to breathe once more. Pein led Konan upstairs, sparing Hinata a glance that told her to watch Seishirou. She nodded fearfully.

"You couldn't use the Bijuu jutsu if you had tried, Konan," Pein said once they were out of earshot.

"I had just wanted bloodshed. I'll blame maternal instincts." She said it with clipped tones, fully aware that he would not believe her.

"We're dispatching a messenger hawk to Konohagakure to inform them that we caught their assassins. Also informing them that the destruction of their village is imminent."

She didn't say anything in reply. Pein took it as a sign to continue.

"In a week, we're going to wipe Konoha off the face of the world."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Pein uses the Bijuu jutsu...

Viva la Vida

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Now, this is going to be a new experience for all of us. No one knows quite what this jutsu is going to *do*, aside from raw destruction. There might be some recoil damage. I'm not sure. I just want everyone to be alert for this," Pein explained. A few of the members nodded seriously. This was not a happy occasion. They were going to wipe out an entire village, civilians, children and all. True, as serial killers this, in itself, didn't bother them in the least, but what bothered them was the uncertainty of the situation. Pein's speech wasn't making it any better.

"When you say 'recoil damage'..." Kisame tried, frowning.

"I have no idea what I mean," Pein replied. "It could create a sonic wave that destroys half the world for all I know. The power of the nine Bijuu has never been used in this way before. There's no precedent to learn from."

"That's not helpful," the shark-nin muttered.

"Are there any last requests before we potentially destroy this whole shitty world?" Kakuzu asked, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah. I want to sacrifice something. I want to know I'm getting into heaven if I actually fucking *die*," Hidan said, raising his hand.

"I want to make one last masterpiece, yeah!" Deidara added.

"I wouldn't mind—"

"I was *kidding*!" Kakuzu spat, snarling at them. "There's no way a single jutsu has enough power to destroy the world. Trust me. I've seen some that come pretty damn close."

Pein didn't say anything on that subject. Instead, he said, "We'll meet tonight, at sunset. Have fun living your last normal day."

"That's... not reassuring," Tobi said flatly.

"I'm just saying. If this thing doesn't blow up in our faces, we're going to rule the world." The leader shrugged. "Of course, the chances that we'll actually fail are only about... three or four percent, and that's generous on the side of suicide."

"Comforting," Itachi deadpanned.

-.-.-

Living their last day was surprisingly easy to do. No one outside of the Akatsuki was to know what was going to go on that night. Konan had asked Hinata to baby-sit Seishirou—a surprising move for her, but a necessity nonetheless. She was going to be with the rest of the group, she had made that clear. And at least she had the protection of two Hyuuga if something failed. Not to mention

Kisho, who could relay messages back and forth through Itachi if need be.

Kisame treated Itachi to dango. It was something he hadn't done (willingly) since he captured the Yonbi. Itachi was immediately suspicious of this, but Kisame dismissed his paranoia as just that, and said, "Consider it a treat for us destroying your village." The genjutsu user just ate his sweets in silence after the comment.

Hidan, predictably, went on a sacrificing spree. He totally cleared out the Ame prison (without permission) and was nearly high from blood loss and religious euphoria by the end of it. Kakuzu, for the first time in his life, decided to not only ignore his partner's annoying rituals, but actually *helped* him break into the prison for the inmates. It was an unexpected show of camaraderie.

Sasori finally gave in to Deidara and went on a 'date' with him. The supposed date consisted of loud arguments about art, much blackmail material revealed, a few clay birds, a clay hare, Hiruko, a street-wide food fight, and Sasori finally dragging Deidara back by the ponytail before he blew something up that mattered. They only made it halfway to the tower before Deidara made a crude comment about hair-pulling and the pair started fighting again. (And then somehow that wound up turning into their first make-out session.)

Pein and Konan just sat together, the entire day. They watched people go by and talked. It was the closest they had ever come to a real date, too. Neither of them mentioned the Bijuu jutsu.

"Konan-senpai never said when she was coming back," Hinata remarked about mid-afternoon.

"I assume she'll be back sometime soon." It was Neji's turn to hold Seishirou. He was not pleased with this. In addition to liking Itachi's ponytail, apparently the infant found all long, dark hair fascinating and pull-worthy. After Hinata found this out the hard way, the two had taken turns holding him ever since.

"Oh, it's not like it's bothering me," she replied with a cheery smile. "I think Seishirou-chan is adorable. He is. And he is a very well-behaved baby."

"How many infants have you come into contact with?" Neji asked, raising an eyebrow. Unfortunately, since he had turned to her, a few locks of hair had shifted near his shoulders, catching Seishirou's attention. The brunette received a rather vicious pull, wincing.

"I used to baby-sit Hanabi all the time," she responded with a frown. "And all of my single D-rank missions were babysitting missions."

"When was the last time you were on a D-rank mission, then?"

"Umm... about... three years ago? Maybe two and a half?"

"Exactly. Your turn to hold Seishirou."

"Fine. Poor baby." He willingly relinquished the infant, and she took him into her arms and wiggled her fingers. He grabbed hold of one of them, trying to chew on it.

"Seishirou or me?" Neji asked.

Hinata frowned, only to hold back a giggle. "It *still* amazes me how you can say such things with a straight face."

"It's a talent I possess," he told her austerely. With that, she had to giggle. This, in turn, made the baby coo, opening his mouth in a broad, uncertain smile. At least, she *thought* it was a smile. She wasn't sure if babies Seishirou's age could smile and really know what it meant. Probably not.

With all of the noise, none of them heard Kisho come in. Of course, he had been there the entire time, only upstairs (presumably in Itachi's room or hunting mice), and he *was* a cat, so it would have been hard to hear him anyway, but that was beside the point. He wrinkled his nose and twitched his whiskers in disdain at the weird sounds Hinata was making to evict another smile from Seishirou. "Do I want to know what's going on in here? Are you two still playing with that ugly kitten?" He trotted daintily over, and jumped up onto the arm of the couch nearest Hinata. "Hmm, Hime-chan?"

"Seishirou-chan is *not* ugly; he's cute."

"He's also not a kitten," Neji added flatly.

"I wasn't talking to you," the cat replied, laying his ears flat. Kisho turned back to Hinata, curling his tail around his paws. "I just heard all of the noise down here and wondered if you were doing one of those ritual things Hidan does."

"No."

"Such a pity. Usually I get to eat some of the leftovers before Zetsu gets to them," Kisho lamented, hanging his head.

"That's disgusting." Hinata wrinkled her nose in revulsion. She hadn't needed that mental image. "Kisho-kitty, this is Seishirou-chan. You haven't really met, have you?"

"Nor did I particularly want to. He is one ugly kitten. Mine are *much* cuter."

"He is not a kitten!"

"*You* have kittens?!" Hinata's exclamation overruled Neji's. "Since when?"

"Err." Kisho shrunk back on his haunches, averting his green eyes. "About a month ago."

Neji snorted, crossing his arms. "You were out being a tomcat and didn't mean to get them, hm?" he asked shrewdly.

The cat's tail frizzed up in defense. "O-Of course not!"

"How many do you have?" Hinata asked, quickly changing the subject. She didn't want any yowls to upset Seishirou. "May I see them some time?"

"Six. And depends on whether or not you bring that ugly kitten, Hime-chan. I've seen what he does; chews on and pulls *everything*. I don't want him to pull apart my kittens."

"Seishirou-chan wouldn't do that! Plus, I'm not sure he should be near kittens right now. They're a lot older than him and already have claws, don't they?"

"Older, yes. But they're still just tiny kittens and their claws aren't *all* that bad."

"Do they have names?"

Kisho could spot where that was going. "Err, yes. Yes they do. You can't name them." She looked crestfallen, but cheered up when Seishirou pulled on her hair with a giggle-like gurgle. Hinata then went back to playing with him, and Kisho decided to move to the other couch before the infant's fingers decided to pull on his tail or something.

After a few moments, in which the kitten subject was hastily dropped, Kisho said casually, "Oh, Itachi-sama told me to tell you something..." The way he said it told them that it was a fairly important thing, and that it was the real reason he'd come downstairs at all. (Because it was common knowledge by now that Kisho really didn't like small children.)

"And what is that?"

"That Konan-san told him to tell you that they'll be gone tonight. Just put Seishirou to bed soon, and they'll probably be back in the morning. They have, err, a mission."

"What *kind* of mission?" Neji asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Nothing!" Kisho replied a bit too quickly.

"What are they doing?" he pressed. "The entire Akatsuki has been acting odd all day, and none of them have been to the tower—oh no."

"Nothing! It's just—It's just a recon mission!" the cat insisted, laying his ears back again. "Really!"

"They're going to use it tonight, aren't they?" he asked quietly. Hinata gasped, looking up from playing with Seishirou. "Kisho. Answer me."

"...Yes. They are. On Konohagakure." Kisho wouldn't meet their white eyes. "They're off to the border now. Pein-san is going to use it from afar, high up on Deidara's bird so he can see the effects without being too close."

"And he decided to take the entire Akatsuki with him?!" Hinata asked in a voice much higher than her normal one.

"Just—It's just for show! A show of power."

"Who would need to see that? Konoha is going to be... destroyed from it, isn't it?"

"No one's sure. Maybe he just wants them there to finish the job if need be?" Kisho said hopefully, pouncing on the uncertainty in Neji's voice. Neither human answered the cat.

-.-.-

The Bijuu had waited contentedly in their prison, a few of them for well over a year now. Somehow, they just *knew* that tonight was the night. Tonight was their last bid for freedom. Their last chance for it.

Pein had done his work, though. Already a few of the demons were testing the prison bars. Of course, without the jutsu actually *active*, it was only really to entertain themselves. They knew that they couldn't do anything until the signing started. The Ichibi, Shukaku, was busy trying to figure out the sealing techniques used. A few of them were definitely Suna in style, but not all of them,

which confused him. Usually different sealing methods didn't mesh. Didn't Pein know that? Or had he done it on purpose, just in case...?

What Pein hadn't known, however, was that the demons were all in the same prison. They could *communicate*. They did, too. Those who had been ripped out of their Jinchuuriki had something important to tell the others, too. Humans were not a hindrance. They were *weapons*.

Those who had been trapped in a human body knew that that was the only way their power could be channeled without weakening, like what had happened to the Sanbi, Isonade. In the wild, with nothing to focus it with, their strength had stagnated and was diluted by that. But with a human... then, they could *really* have some fun.

Oh, it wasn't all easy as that, of course. The Kyuubi could attest to that. The seals used to make the Jinchuuriki were complex and long-lasting. They were nearly impossible to break out of. He had had the most progress with his, and that was only because of his immense power. Shukaku and Nekomata had had no such luck with their human prisons. But, they had been trapped in said prisons for years. Plenty of time to study the seals used to bind them. And it was just a matter of reversing a few of them...

"How much longer is this going to take?" the Hachibi complained, curling three of his tails around him.

"Oh, quit complaining. You've been in here the shortest amount of time, aside from the Kyuubi there," the Nibi replied with a hiss. "Some of us have been in here for *months*."

Shukaku cleared his throat, trying to ignore his tailed siblings. He'd been in here longer than her, anyway...

"Patience is a virtue," the Yonbi said flatly.

"Maybe for mortals, who have the time to waste like that, but I'm tired of waiting," the ox demon replied snappishly. "Pein's arrogance knows no bounds, and it's starting to irk me. How long does he really think he can hold us—"

"Shut up already!" Sokou shouted, ruffling his feathers. The Yonbi quickly calmed himself, taking a few deep breaths and clicking his beak in irritation. "We all know it's going to end tonight, either way, so you can keep quiet for a few more hours. You've been in here the shortest amount, aside from Youko, so you have no right to complain."

The Hachibi didn't reply, keeping silent. He didn't look pleased at being embarrassed like that, especially in front of their siblings, and shot crimson-eyed glares at the cockatrice in full view of everyone. No one said anything for a long while, until the Kyuubi, Youko, spoke up. He was the only one who could still keep everyone in check without rancor developing.

"Shukaku, how is it?" he asked quietly, all nine tails waving behind him as he walked over to where the tanuki was seated.

"I can solve the Suna styled seals no problem. I'm half done with that now. But... I haven't seen some of these before. I wouldn't have a clue as to how to unravel them," he replied grimly.

"Remember, all you need to do is *weaken* them," the Gobi said helpfully. He trotted over, five tails wagging happily. "We can do the rest. Maybe. Hopefully. Really."

"Yes, he's right," the Kyuubi agreed. "Perhaps even now you've done all we need."

"Perhaps." Shukaku rubbed a blunt paw at his eyes, and then returned looking at the seals decorating their prison. "But I like to be prepared."

"Nothing wrong with preparation!" the Gobi barked, wagging his tails again.

"What do you think will be the first thing we do once we're out?" Nekomata purred, slinking over. She curled a tail around Hachimata's face as she passed, just to further annoy the Hachibi.

"Revenge," the Kyuubi growled. No one else had to say anything further. They understood.

-.-.-

The Akatsuki stood at the edge of the border between the Lands of Fire and Rain. Their uneasiness had melted away with the day. Now, as the stars twinkled overhead, they were nothing but confident. Even Konan, who had been edgy about leaving Seishirou behind, had finally calmed herself. Her hands were folded in front of her flat stomach, and her eyes were staring down the path that would inevitably lead to Konohagakure.

"Deidara, up," Pein said quietly. The Iwa-nin nodded, and pulled out the condor (he was getting more exotic with his birds now) he had created earlier. The large bird appeared in a cloud of nin-smoke, stretching its massive wings and examining the leader down its hooked beak. Pein ignored the look and followed Deidara up onto the bird. With a flap of its wings, they were airborne. Deidara glanced over the edge of the bird's neck, watching as the downdraft ruffled the Akatsuki members' hair. He and Sasori locked eyes for a moment, and then, they soared higher into the sky. "I want to be further into Fire territory, but I want the Akatsuki in sight at all times. As high up as we need to see Konoha."

"Yeah," Deidara replied noncommittally. There were only wisps of clouds in the night sky, made silvery by the moonlight. Soon they were above even those. He hadn't been this high up since his fight with Shinjiro... Hopefully he wouldn't have to come back down the same way.

Then, there was the twinkle of a city on the horizon. Not really even on the horizon; it just appeared in midst of the dark forest stretched out below them. It could only be Konohagakure. Deidara leaned over the condor's head to stare at the village through his scope, and then finally zoomed in. Yes, it was definitely a city. And large enough only to be Konohagakure.

"Is that it?" Pein asked quietly.

"Yeah, Leader-sama," he replied.

Then, Pein started signing.

It was one of the longest strings of hand signs needed for any single jutsu. Seventy-three, in an order that Deidara probably could have never remembered. (Of course, he never used genjutsu and rarely used actual ninjutsu, so he wasn't much for signs.) It seemed to take an eternity. He could even feel that Pein thought this; the man's entire body was taut with tension and apprehension.

Ninja, as a rule, hated uncertainty. It went against everything they stood for and fought for. It made them uneasy and unruly. And here they were, having to embrace it on a grand scale. It was going to change the world, either way.

There was no sound except the faint wind whistling past their ears, their hair, their clothes, the clay of the bird below them. Above them, the stars twinkled, unaware and uncaring of the world below, and what was transpiring. The lights of Konohagakure, too, twinkled. Only unlike the stars, they were about to be put out.

Then, finally, Pein was done.

He murmured something, presumably the name of the jutsu or some other incantation needed to complete it, and then pointed up at the sky with two fingers. Deidara, who was in front of him, instinctively ducked. Pein drew a line straight downward, to Konohagakure.

The wisps of clouds all around and below them seemed to melt away. Deidara tasted raw chakra in the air, enough to make a shiver go down his spine. The stars suddenly became dimmer. The artist looked up at the abruptly darker sky, but his attention was diverted when something brighter than the half-full moon appeared in the sky where Pein had originally pointed. The air around them was humming with chakra, and the bird below them gave a shudder as it adjusted.

The bright thing in the sky above Konoha was the brightest, whitest thing Deidara had ever seen. It was vaguely oval in shape, glowing faintly around the edges and even illuminating the forest far below. Its light washed all the color out of the world.

And then, it streaked downward, leaving a white scar on the night sky where it had been.

Konohagakure promptly disappeared in its light. There was no sound. The glimmer finally died down, leaving the night as dark as it had been previously. Except that there was nothing but a *huge* crater where the village had just been.

Then the sound hit them.

It came with a shockwave, and the roar was nothing compared to it. The shockwave caught the bird just as it had raised its wings for a flap; the result was that both Deidara and Pein were thrown violently off. The bird was reduced to an inanimate statue by the raw chakra in the wave. Luckily, Deidara had already created another bird. The rook caught them both and allowed the condor to plummet to the forest below, creating an explosion when it hit.

Once they were safely airborne once more, both men peeked over the fringe of feathers on the bird's head. Yup, Konohagakure was now a crater. There was nothing left but some sort of thick haze, and a few toppled trees near the edges of the crater. There was no smoke, no fire, no screaming or blood or looks of terror from close-range killing. A clean way to kill. Ruthless, efficient, clean, and utterly impersonal. The ultimate jutsu.

Deidara slowly lowered his bird, unable to comprehend what he had just seen. That had been... amazing. The perfect example of true art. Konoha had been there, and then, in a flash, they were gone. Completely and utterly destroyed. A prompt and utter destruction, like Pein had warned. A masterpiece.

As they descended, shouts could be heard from the Akatsuki. Neither man saw the darkened shapes in the haze leftover from the Bijuu jutsu.

"Was—Was *that* it?"

"That was fucking huge!"

"Is there *anything* left of the village?"

"That was overkill!"

"Was erasing an entire village really that easy...?"

Pein jumped off the bird before Deidara. He stumbled slightly as he landed, and went straight to Konan. He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her, crushing his lips against hers. Most of the other members looked away in embarrassment of the public affection.

Deidara practically fell off of the bird. He was still in a daze. How many lives had that just destroyed? Hundreds, if not thousands (because he didn't know how large the civilian population of Konoha had been) had just died in that. Instantaneous death. Genuine art. Even his bombs couldn't compare to *that*. Oh, what he would give to learn that jutsu.

Sasori interrupted his wishful thinking. He pulled Deidara to his feet, placing a hand on both sides of his face to stare into his eyes. "Deidara. What happened up there? Did it work?"

That snapped Deidara out of his astonishment. "What? Of course it did, yeah. Were you expecting something to go wrong?"

"Of course not."

"Was danna worried about me, yeah?" he cooed.

Sasori blinked and let go of him, letting him drop to the ground. "Of *course* not. I was worried this entire thing would blow up in our faces."

"Always the pessimist, Sasori," Pein had detached himself from Konan long enough to say that. He grinned at the members circling him, nothing short of euphoric. "It worked just as planned. It was a success."

"Was it a one-time jutsu?" Itachi asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. I'll suppose we'll just have to wait to test that, unless one of you has a burning hatred of some village you'd like to come clean about."

No one replied, so Konan just wrapped an arm around Pein's waist, pulling him closer to her side. "Let's just go home and tell everyone the good news," she said softly, brushing a lock of azure hair out of her eyes with her free hand.

That was when they heard the first roar. It had the tone of being distant, but was loud and cruel enough to halt even those hardened killers. Because they knew what it was.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Total chaos. Death, blood, gore, revenge and tears. All while trying to escape from the Bijuu.

I'll Be Back, I Promise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hinata looked up in alarm as the sirens went off. That couldn't be good. Was there another assassin? But even as she thought it, she knew it was stupid. Nothing short of the end of the world go make the city-wide siren go off, since the Akatsuki were off using the Bijuu jutsu. She stood up, reaching out for Seishirou. The loud noise had woken him, and now he was crying fitfully, waving his little fists in the air. Neji gave him to her, and ran over to the door, throwing it open.

Hinata stayed inside, trying to calm Seishirou. Neji went out to investigate, while Kisho stayed by the open door, possibly as some sort of guard. "What's going on?" she asked to no one in particular. Seishirou quieted a bit at the sound of her voice, so she decided just to keep talking. "It's okay, Seishirou-chan. Neji-niisan will make everything better, you'll see. Nothing's wrong. It's just a drill, or something insignificant..."

In her heart she knew it was a lie.

Seishirou gradually calmed down over the course of the next twenty minutes. Hinata paced, rocking the baby. Kisho just stayed near the door, peeking his head around the corner to try to keep an eye on things. Neji still hadn't returned.

Then, all at once, Zetsu stepped out of the ground in front of the open door and sprinted inside. He paused to pant, hands on his knees, and then looked up at a surprised Hinata and Seishirou. "City-wide evacuation. Take Seishirou and *go*," he barked at her. "*Now!*"

Hinata felt like crying. So it had backfired on them. On the world, really. She didn't know how, though, and hopefully the Akatsuki could still get things under control. She had seen them perform miracles before, after all. "Y-Yes." The dark-haired kunoichi nodded, and ran up the stairs to Konan's room. She grabbed an extra blanket and the only bag she could find, throwing in a few kunai and baby things, before dashing to her room. Seishirou squealed excitedly at the fast pace. Halfway there, she turned and instead headed to Deidara's room.

She grabbed an armful of the numberless clay dolls packed into the room. Most of them she dropped into the bag as well, but three of them she just put in the blanket Seishirou was wrapped in to hold. Then she grabbed the chakra feather laying on his bed, a remnant of Takamaru. She pushed it into a belt loop on her pants, and then hiked Seishirou up a bit more on her hip, throwing the half-full bag over her other shoulder.

Hinata was just coming back downstairs when Neji and Deidara ran into the tower. Deidara didn't stop running; he just sprinted up and threw his arms around her, kissing her hurriedly on the forehead. "We have to go, Bya-chan. The demons—the Bijuu, they got loose. The Akatsuki is going to try to stop them, but we're evacuating the village just in case. Yeah. Konan told me to tell you to keep Seishirou close to you, and guard him with your life. And you," he paused and looked over at Neji, "Guard both of them with *your* life."

Neji just nodded, panting slightly.

Deidara then turned back to Hinata again. "Don't worry. We're probably overreacting. We took down the Bijuu once before, after all, and they don't even have Jinchuuriki this time, right?"

"Ri-Right," she agreed without quite understanding why.

"I'll be back. I promise." He gave her another quick peck on the cheek, and then dashed back out the door. Hinata felt a tear run down the side of her face, before Neji took her hand and pulled her out of the tower. Kisho followed at their heels, tail frizzed out and ears laid back against his skull.

"Don't worry, Hime-chan! Itachi-sama and the rest of the Akatsuki will keep Amegakure safe. They have before, and they will this time. Just keep the kitten safe and let them take care of it all!" the cat shouted, obviously trying to comfort her. She just nodded, unable to form any words. Seishirou was losing the amusement of all of the running, now, and just whined uncomfortably from where he was pressed to her chest.

"This way," Neji said quietly, pulling her towards the cliff. Already people were dashing up the side of it, standing on top of it. Even a Bijuu would take awhile to get that far up, so it would be the perfect vantage point. "Hinata, don't worry. They know what they're doing."

-.-.-

"What is that?" Suigetsu asked, head snapping up as the group of three heard the sirens. "What's going on in Ame?"

"I don't know."

"No surprise there," he snickered, earning a slap from Karin.

"Do they know we're here?" she asked, turning to Sasuke. He just narrowed his eyes.

"I doubt it. We just got in the country, and there's not even any of that crazy rain to point out where we are. It was probably about that weird burst of light we saw earlier." Suigetsu dismissed it easily, rolling back his shoulders. "Appropriate welcome, though."

Sasuke frowned. Something was off. No, there was no way the sirens could be about them. Truthfully, he didn't even think Pein or Itachi would warrant his appearance as that important. Moreover, he had waited the four months, so by the leader's rules, he could face his brother. It had to be something else. But what? Another war?

"Karin, what do you sense in the immediate vicinity?" he asked sharply, turning to her.

She flushed slightly at the sudden attention. "Nothing in the immediate vicinity. Just us."

"And farther out?"

"The edge of the village, and... three—no, four, no, more—several strong chakra signatures heading east away from it. One of them is Itachi, I think. His partner is there, though, and it seems like more Akatsuki members."

Why would the Akatsuki flee their own village? Unless they were defending it from something...

Then it clicked.

"Follow them!" Sasuke shouted over a shoulder as he tore through the restored forest in that direction. Suigetsu and Karin looked at each other, for a split second, and then chased after him.

-.-.-

Pein had made the first real mistake of his life. The first one that impacted such a great number of people, at any rate. He had assumed that the Bijuu were weaker without their Jinchuuriki.

Perhaps, if he had known that they weren't, things would have turned out differently.

It had been a mad dash back to Amegakure, to restock on weapons and warn the villagers. Then the ten Akatsuki members bravely sprinted back out to the Ame border, where the Bijuu had already gotten that far. Before they even set eyes on the demons, the tang of chakra in the air was palpable and the roaring was deafening.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

The Akatsuki members halted immediately. Deidara spat out at least half a dozen birds from his hands, maximizing one. Silence still rung around them. He jumped onto the bird's back, rising into the air.

But even as he did that, they found the Bijuu again.

A scaled tail snapped out of the trees on either side of the path, toppling the trees as if they were matchsticks. The shinobi scattered as they avoided it. However, a second scaled tail shot out in a straight line, going straight for Kisame. The Kiri-nin dodged to the side, drawing Samehada. He ducked under a third tail, and a feathered wing that followed it. The Yonbi slithered out of the decimated forest, at least twice the size of Kisame. It reared back, crowing, and then tried to impale him with a razor-sharp beak. He threw himself out of the way—unfortunately into the fourth tail.

It wrapped around him like a snake, pulling him high into the air. Kisame grunted as the force of it cracked an arm, and he tried to get enough leverage to use Samehada. Even though it wasn't touching the Bijuu, the sword's chakra-draining ability was going crazy, drawing in so much energy yet doing nothing to stop the demon.

"Kisame!" Itachi shouted, freezing as he stared up at his partner in the demon's grasp.

This was wrong, this was all wrong. These demons weren't supposed to be this skilled without human bodies! They were supposed to be stupid, slow, lumbering beasts with the intellect of a post. Granted, even in their true form a single tail could level quite an area, but they didn't *know* that. Or rather, they weren't *supposed* to. That's what it all came down to. The Bijuu weren't supposed to be this strong without Jinchuuriki—granted they weren't supposed to be out at all, but that seemed irrelevant at this point—and they weren't supposed to be fighting as expertly as they were.

Kisame managed to get out of the coils of tail wrapped around him, and it was only thanks to Samehada. He landed neatly by Itachi, chest heaving and looking appropriately terrified. He grinned weakly, following his partner as they ran into the best cover they could find—the rainforest around them. Parts were still bare and charred, but at least it was some form of cover.

It was like a sick game of tag. Itachi could hear growls, howls and roars of pleasure as the Bijuu hunted down the Akatsuki and their leisure. Several times the pair very narrowly avoided the Yonbi or some other tails—it was hard to identify which was which. Nine demons, with a variety of tails and numbers. A total of forty-five tails, twenty-eight clawed paws, eight sets of teeth, four

hooves, one razor-sharp beak, all to avoid. True, the larger of the bunch (like the Kyuubi) was easy enough to spot and avoid. But the Shichibi was the smallest of the Bijuu, just small enough to stay under the tree tops and keep hidden until it ambushed someone. Itachi had watched as Zetsu was nearly disemboweled by said surprise attack.

This was a one-sided battle. They all knew it, but what could they do?

-.-.-

"What's going on?" Hinata shrieked. The citizens on top of the cliff were likewise screaming; they had just heard the roar of the Bijuu. Children and babies were crying—Seishirou included—and there was a flurry of movement to make signs and take out weapons. "Neji—what's going on?!"

"I can't see that far!" he snapped in reply. He'd already tried to see with his Byakugan, but they were just out of his range of vision. It was easier to try to use the cliff's height to spot something. "Kisho, can you tell what's happening?"

"Itachi-sama isn't here with me! I'm in the dark as much as any of you!" the cat hissed, baring his teeth.

"You're his *summon*! Isn't there some sort of link you two have?!"

"You've obviously never summoned an animal before! It just doesn't work that way. There's the *Kuchiyose* and the *Ura Kuchiyose*, but that's as far as—"

"A reverse summoning technique...?" Both Hinata and Neji had gone very quiet at the mention.

Kisho sighed, and then sat back on his hind legs. He brought his paws together, forming distorted signs.

-.-.-

It was taken for granted that the Bijuu would finally catch up to someone. It was really just another race, a contest where speed was the important thing. Itachi had to admit that he was selfishly wishing that Hidan would be the first to go down. Even Sasori. As long as it was someone else. For some reason, the common mental consensus declared that once someone died, a retreat would be possible. Perhaps they thought that the Bijuu would be as stupid as to celebrate or something, or get caught up ripping apart the body. Suddenly there was no comradeship between the organization. Even partnerships were strained.

But Itachi and Kisame kept ahead of the forty-five tails, twenty-eight paws and the rest of the danger. They were perhaps the closest pair in the Akatsuki. They worked the best together, certainly. Kisame was always looking out for Itachi, and vice versa, to some degree. The Kiri-nin even pushed Itachi out of the way of one of the Nibi's two tails, taking the brunt of the attack himself. Luckily, he had braced himself against the ground and put Samehada in front of him. The result was that the demon cat's tail was cleanly cut in half, evoking a yowl that had even the nearest of the other Bijuu wincing.

Itachi ducked into the undergrowth, sensing more than seeing Kisame follow him. The forest was their friend, their ally. The only light was the moon, and the trees cancelled that out. Their dark uniforms were also suddenly helpful in camouflage. Some of them might actually survive the night.

Something shot out of the murky forest to the side of them, wrapping around Kisame and hauling him up, clear of the trees and into the open air. "So, you think you can seal *me*, Kiri-nin?" the Yonbi hissed, clicking its beak painfully close to Kisame's head.

Itachi didn't stop this time. He kept going, turning and running straight at the demon about to kill his partner. It was probably the most altruistic thing he'd ever do. "*Amaterasu*!"

The forest around them promptly burst into black flames, most of it centered on the Yonbi's feathered chest and stomach. Itachi, still running to avoid his own attack and the flailing, screaming demon, absently rubbed a palm against his eye, hissing in irritation as it came away with blood. He closed his right eye for a reprieve. Above him, Kisame was again dropped by the demon he captured, landing easily on his feet. Samehada repelled the fire somewhat, allowing him to slowly make it back to his partner.

The ninjutsu spread through the forest rapidly, if the shouts and yells of the members and Bijuu alike were anything to go by. The Yonbi was still thrashing around, giant scales falling off of its tails as they were scorched off. Feathers, likewise, were raining down, only to be consumed by *Amaterasu*. Kisame finally made it back to Itachi, placing a hand on his shoulder. That was all of the gratitude he was able to show, but Itachi understood. He just wished his eye hadn't started *bleeding*, of all things. It stung, and he didn't need his vision impaired.

Then, the Yonbi reared up on its snake half, and spat dark purple fumes out of its mouth. The flames nearest went out instantly, the poisoned gas robbing it all of its needed oxygen. Itachi and Kisame turned and fled the toxic smoke, ducking their faces into their high collars just in case.

It is pursuing us because Kisame was the one who captured it. All of the Bijuu are thinking that. So what of the Kyuubi...? Itachi couldn't help but think.

With a frightful crow, the Yonbi was once again pursuing them through the trees, toppling them completely. The pair were nearly caught when the Hachibi blocked their path, but they managed to escape with a devastating water jutsu by Kisame. And even then, it was a narrow escape. They might have to retreat soon and just take their chances.

Then, as they were escaping through the mud and knee-high water, the unthinkable happened.

The Yonbi caught up.

And this time, it wasn't going to waste time picking Kisame up. It just threw two tails at them, another blocking their immediate escape route. Both Akatsuki members ducked under the two tails, and straightened—just in time for the last tail.

Itachi was shorter than Kisame. By a good ten or so centimeters (they had once measured it, when the group had wondered which pair had the biggest height difference). And that was all it took for one of them to escape unscathed.

The fourth tail made a graceful, cutting arc through the forest, cutting down everything in its path. It was too late to dodge or duck. Still, they tried. Shinobi training and all that. Itachi had just bent his knees, and Kisame was bending forward at the waist, both of them trying to get under the tail. But it was too late, really it was. The scaled tail cleanly decapitated Kisame, the chakra

surrounding it cauterizing the wound before more than a few drops of blood could escape. Those that did, splattered onto the ground, and a shocked Itachi's face.

And just before it could circle back and come for him, Itachi disappeared in a puff of smoke.

-.-.-

The crowd around them parted when a cloud of smoke deposited Uchiha Itachi in their midst. He landed on all fours, panting. Without saying anything, or before anyone else could say anything, he turned and glared at Kisho with the Mangekyou. The cat shrunk back, laying his ears back against his head.

Hinata rushed forward and helped him to his feet. Itachi irritably jerked his arm out of her grasp, not sparing her a glance.

"What's going on?" Neji asked, breaking the silence at last.

"The Bijuu broke free. We're... not winning. Kisame is dead. Evacuate, now. Especially *you*, with Seishirou." Itachi finally glanced at Hinata, and then looked at the infant in her arms. There was silence all around the Ame citizens. No one knew what to say. After everything, the civil war, the last Great Shinobi War, extracting all of the demons... and *now* the Akatsuki failed?

"You... you have blood on your face," Hinata said dumbly, ignoring the obvious questions. Itachi scowled—his sudden expressiveness pointed to how shook up he must have been—and just rubbed his sleeve over his cheek, doing nothing but smearing it.

"It's not mine. Most of it isn't. Now get out of here, all of you! We'll find some way to beat it."

With that, the eldest Uchiha turned and sprinted down the cliff, in the direction of Amegakure and the Bijuu battle. No one else could say anything. No one wanted to.

It was a long time before anyone spoke. It was even longer before anyone moved. Kisho was the first to do so, and snapped everyone back to attention with, "Alright, enough immobility and silence! We need to get moving, away from those demons, humans!"

And just like that, there was commotion and panic once more. People began shouting for friends and family, parents rushing to get their children, kids and babies crying and even the occasional pet or summoned animal barking or croaking or tweeting. Seishirou began whimpering again, but Hinata hushed him with his pacifier. She looked around for where most people were heading, and it seemed that the common consensus was to head west. What was west, she had no idea, but it was in the opposite direction of the Bijuu.

"Come on." Suddenly, Neji was there, too, tugging gently on her sleeve. He was pointing north.

"But—"

"We're going northeast. If we can circle around the demons, we'll be safe. Otherwise, they're just going to finish up here, and then pick off the mass of the evacuees heading west. We can't travel in a group, Hinata."

"But—"

"It's all up to them. Think like a ninja. You don't want to be caught in a crowd with Seishirou and Bijuu all around you, do you?" he asked seriously, pulling her insistently northward. Hinata shook her head and dug her heels in.

"We can't just let them cover for us—"

"The smart ones will get away. We won't be the only survivors. You can't save everyone, Hinata. It's your job to save yourself, and Seishirou." Neji said it gently, but there was no room for argument in his tone. And he had a point. Kisho, too, was weaving in and out of their feet, meowing incoherently.

"What about... Itachi? *Deidara-kun*?" she whispered fearfully. Itachi had said Kisame was already dead. Who else was? Who else would join him? Hinata made up her mind then and there. She had enough clay in her bag to rival Deidara, and she knew how to use it, too. She had to help. She *had* to.

"Hinata, no, don't." Neji tried to stop her, but she just pushed Seishirou into his arms and pulled out a small hawk-like bird. She cupped it in her hands, smiling up at both the infant and brunette.

"Hinata, it's suicide."

"The Akatsuki members are giving their lives just to stall the demons right now. I have to help."

"You are *not* Akatsuki. You're not up to their level, no matter how far you've come. And this is *their* mistake, Hinata. Not yours to fix."

"I have to help Deidara-kun," she replied simply. The Hyuuga kunoichi maximized the bird with the proper seal, making sure it was as it should be. It had been awhile since she'd used these. Neji hurriedly instructed Kisho to sit down, and placed Seishirou by the cat. Obediently, Kisho curled around the infant, purring to keep him calm.

Neji then walked over, past Hinata. As he passed her, he pulled Takamaru's feather out of her belt loop, and reached over, cutting the head off of the bird, kicking it off of the cliff as it detonated. Hinata looked at him in shock and outrage, unsure of what to say. Then she glanced down at her bag on the ground, between them. "I am not going to allow you to do this, Hinata-sama," Neji said quietly, also looking down at the bag full of clay between them.

"You're not going to stop me, Neji-niisan," she replied, edging towards it. Before she could even do that, though, he darted forward and retrieved it, slinging it over his shoulder and holding her at feather-point. Hinata backed up, putting her hands up in defense, surprised that he would do that.

"Let me go."

"No. You have your duty, and that's to protect Seishirou."

"You can do that. Or Kisho. Anyone here would gladly take the son of Leader-sama."

"Hinata, this is suicide and you know it. Why are you so desperate to kill yourself in the name of protecting Deidara? He can escape a lot more easily if he's not worrying about you."

As he was speaking, Hinata brought her foot up and kicked the sword-like feather out of his hands, catching it. She just pushed it back into the belt loop, and feigned a jump to the right, trying to ignore the sense he made. Neji saw through the move and nearly caught her when she ran around his left, but she just tore her wrist out of his grasp and ran to the edge of the cliff. Just as she was about to jump off of it, he caught her, throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her, kicking and screaming, back to where Kisho and Seishirou sat, watching them. Apparently it was amusing for

both cat and infant.

Neji gently set her back down on the grass, placing a hand on each of her shoulders, keeping her from getting back up. "I don't want to hurt you. But I will if it means saving your life."

"B-But Deidara—"

"Deidara is a dead man, Hinata!" he said viciously. "They all are. They are sacrificing themselves one last time for this village, keeping the Bijuu away while we all escape. What would Deidara think if you just threw that away?"

Hinata could feel the tears welling up in her eyes. There was no way that could be true. They were the *Akatsuki*, for god's sake! "No, they aren't so easily defeated, they wouldn't do anything so noble —"

"Yes, they would. Let them have their heroic death. Just come with me now. ...Please." He finally sounded defeated. Neji sat down in the grass next to her, hanging his head.

"He's... He's my best friend," she whispered weakly.

"And that's why he's doing this for you."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The retreat from the Bijuu is finally called, not without heavy losses. The rest of Amegakure finally evacuate the village, but the demons, without their Akatsuki toys, pick them off next for fun. Can anyone escape this...?

It's The End Of The World As We Know It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Deidara, contrary to Neji's words to Hinata, wasn't quite dead. Yet. Which amazed him, really. He had lost four birds already, but he was keeping up with the losses. In a fully aerial battle, he was at home. Whenever a tail or paw would shoot up into the air to try to knock him out of it, he would already have another bird active, and merely jump to that one and somersault or do a barrel roll to get out of the retaliation strike. He was keeping ahead of things. Barely.

And at least until his clay ran out.

Deidara knew it was a serious flaw of his. He was never prepared, as far as clay went. And normally, he could resort to rock jutsus and taijutsu if he ran out. Not this time. If he ran out of his birds, he would die, simple as that. And he knew that. Which is why he wasn't doing anything besides keeping out of the way and keeping an eye on things.

Kakuzu seemed to be doing the most damage, though that might have been because he was the one panicking most. Every other moment, it seemed, a massive jutsu was unleashed that would further annoy the Bijuu stalking him. He was rapidly clearing the forest, too, taking away their hiding spots. Which wasn't good.

Hidan was alive purely for the two facts that he was sticking close to his partner, and that he couldn't die. He was primarily a close-range fighter, and without any blood from the chakra beasts, he was next to useless. Deidara could dimly hear him over the distance and jutsus below swearing and praying at the top of his lungs.

Zetsu was playing hide and seek with the demons. He would pop up in random places, as far as the blonde on the bird could tell, just to keep an eye on things. Maybe he was even going as far as to *tease* the demons. But they could never quite catch up with him.

Tobi, too, was staying ahead of the Bijuu in that sense. He would disappear and reappear haphazardly, running and dodging in between these disappearances like a genin with a jounin on his trail. Which it very well might have been. Aside from his speed, Deidara had never seen the masked shinobi *do* anything. He was probably toast, soon.

Pein was summoning creatures left and right. Even a few of his other bodies, it seemed, though they would disappear after a few hits like a shadow clone. There was his three-headed dog, trying to pin the Ichibi, a chameleon-type beast with a snake's head for a tail, and several other odd animals with the same ringed eyes he possessed. They were, more or less, keeping the Bijuu occupied and away from him, much to the demons' annoyance.

Konan was playing it safe, like Deidara. She would hover over the battlefield, albeit at a lower altitude, with her paper wings. Occasionally she would swoop to attack, even going as far as to use Itachi's black fire to ignite her own paper weapons, but mostly stayed out of the fighting. It was obvious that the pregnancy had dulled her skills, though how much, he couldn't tell. So she was stuck to sniping.

Itachi and Kisame had completely disappeared. This alarmed Deidara, at first. After all, they had been the ones moving the most (Tobi and Zetsu aside, but he couldn't really track their movements easily) with the Yonbi doggedly on their tails. He could usually pick them out in amongst the

rubble and fires, sprinting from patch of trees to patch of trees. But not now. In fact, the four-tailed demon had move on to fight Pein's chameleon. It wouldn't have given up for nothing.

Kisame and Itachi are dead, Deidara thought, suddenly feeling very cold.

He peered over the edge of the bird, desperately seeking out Sasori. He, too, was at a disadvantage, but at least he was holding his ground. So far. He had refused, too, when Deidara had demanded that he come up into the safer air with him. But Sasori was a veteran; he knew what he was doing, thank god. He had unleashed a veritable *hoard* of puppets and assorted weapons on any Bijuu who dared come close enough, almost suffocating an unwary Nibi when it had strayed to close to the iron sand. But that's not to say he hadn't suffered any losses; all around him, broken puppets, pieces of them, and various weaponry littered the ground. Probably at least half of his forces had been decimated.

Then, as Deidara turned, he caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he was surprised to find it was Itachi, *joining* the battle again, of all things. But before he could even react properly to that, the Kyuubi gave out a mighty, triumphant roar.

"You think you could capture the Bijuu, Madara? Weren't satisfied with the Kyuubi on a leash?" the fox growled in a high voice, grinning as only foxes could. It had Tobi pinned under two massive paws, nine tails waving excitedly behind it. Deidara zoomed in on his scope—because who was *Madara*? (though the name sounded familiar)—and was surprised to find that half of Tobi's mask had been shattered. He was too far away and too high up to make any details, but it was interesting nonetheless.

The captive shinobi said something. Then, Pein's three-headed dog bounded over and tried to tackle the Kyuubi, but the demon fox just lashed out with all of its tails. The canine went down, not getting back up.

"This ends here, now. Your arrogance was your sin, and this is your punishment."

Tobi wriggled out from under the paws, making a mad dash for the cover of the forest. He lost the other half of his mask somewhere in the sprint. The Kyuubi jumped up onto its paws and tore after him, effortlessly getting in between him and his goal. Before Tobi could react (aside from skidding to a halt), the fox threw him into the air with one of its tails. Then, with a snap of its jaws, Tobi was no more.

Deidara dimly heard Konan scream. That had to be the second Akatsuki member down, then. They were rapidly running out of members.

"Get out of here!" The distance made Pein's voice faded and fuzzy, but it was still distinct among the battle noises. He was standing on top of a massive panda's head, cupping his hands over his mouth and shouting, "Get the hell out of here! Retreat, now!"

Then the Kyuubi turned on him. Red eyes glittering, it stalked up behind him like some sort of twisted cat. A giant demon was hard to miss, though, and Pein was already jumping down from his summon, running for the cover of the forest. He almost made it, too, until the Shichibi cut him off and batted him back into the clearing of the battlefield with a blunt paw. Before either it or the Kyuubi could pounce, however, Konan swooped down and grabbed his outstretched hand, pulling him into the sky with a beat of her paper wings.

The Rokubi slunk out of the shadows, though, and tossed them out of the air with some sort of electrical jutsu.

That's when things *really* went bad.

One or two deaths, the Akatsuki could handle. It wouldn't be pretty, but they could handle it. But three? Or even four? That was nearly half the organization. *And* one of those was going to be Pein, their leader, if the demons had anything to say about it.

Now, Deidara had always been pushing the limits of his so-called 'loyalty' to the organization. (In a way, all of them had.) But it didn't mean he was going to sit aside and watch two of his comrades murdered, especially so soon after Tobi's demise. He saw another blur of movement out of the corner of his eye, more likely than not, another member trying desperately to keep the Akatsuki together. The Iwa-nin dove down on his bird, spitting a dragon out of the mouth on his right hand. He threw it down, still minimized, to precede his near-freefall. With his left hand, he made the sign, and it burst into full-sized life, hitting the ground with enough force to knock even the Rokubi off balance.

The dragon curled around them, its tail lashing out and jaws opening in a silent roar. Deidara landed lightly by where Pein and Konan lay, Zetsu already trying to shake them awake. Hidan, too, of all people—hadn't he been the most rebellious?—was there.

"'Bout time you got off your proverbial high horse and helped us," he hissed, wiping some blood out of his eye. "Jashin-sama punishes those who don't—"

"*Shut the hell up, Hidan,*" Zetsu snarled. He turned back to where he was helping Konan into a sitting position. The blue-haired woman was holding her head, grimacing when her hand came away with blood. Her flower fell out of her hair, wilted and scorched, lying lifelessly at her feet. "This isn't good, Konan."

"Tell me about it..." she muttered, standing unsteadily on her feet. But at least she was standing.

Deidara was trying to haul Pein into a sitting position, but the man seemed to be unconscious. Which was as good as dead right now. "Someone help me wake up Leader-sama, yeah."

The dragon curled around them created almost a safe haven. It kept the chaos of the battle outside away, almost muffling the noises. Of course, they were safe only by the fact that the clay sculpture was so *large*, and it seemed as if Kakuzu, stuck on the other side, was trying to keep the demons busy. They had little time.

Hidan succeeded in waking the orange-haired leader by wringing out his hair over his open mouth, letting blood and sweat drip onto his face. Konan looked ready to either slap him or throw up, though luckily she did neither. Because Pein sat bolt upright and punched the immortal. He turned his head and coughed up the thankfully small amount of sweaty blood, wiping his chin. "At least I didn't piss in your mouth! Who the fuck *honestly* keeps their damn mouth *open* when they go out cold, anyway?!" Hidan snapped, rubbing his jaw where Pein had punched him. "I just saved your worthless, heathen life!"

"Next time, let me die," Pein replied flatly. He did a quick check over himself, and then moved on to Konan. He spent a lot more time making sure she was alright. They both seemed fine, though most of the leader's piercings had either been knocked or torn out, and that led to a lot of (superficial) bleeding. He probably looked worse than he was. Hopefully. "Konan, why did you *do* that?"

She glared at him. Deidara, Zetsu and Hidan shuffled away awkwardly, not wanting to get in the middle of this. "Because, Pein, I—"

Then the dragon around them exploded.

The blast also detonated Deidara's escape bird. All he knew was that he was suddenly thrown forward, and when he reached out for a clay wing to haul himself upright on, it wasn't there. He ran his hands over his arms and chest to make sure nothing was missing, and then slowly got to his feet. Only to be knocked backward by a blunt, sand-colored paw.

Deidara was caught in midair by the thing he least wanted to be—sand. It was already working its way up his body, passing his hips and pinning one arm. "Damn," he hissed, spitting out a clay dove before the sand took his other hand as well. He then took a deep breath as it completely encompassed him, trying to force that air out of his lungs.

He somehow made his hand into the seal needed. The dove, still in his hand, exploded, and the sand all around him disintegrated. Deidara dropped to the ground, holding his burnt hand (thankfully, the sand had insulated the rest of his body from the explosion), and would have dearly loved to just sit there and *breathe*, but his shinobi training kicked him into action.

Shaking sand out of his clothes and hair that might be later used against him, Deidara sprinted for the nearest cover—Itachi. He had either started another black fire or merely spread the first, but he was almost completely surrounded by the fire and even the Bijuu didn't seem too keen on getting too close to it. He ran through the last opening before it closed behind him, encompassing them both.

Itachi turned to look at him, clearly surprised. There was blood all over his face, but he seemed to be the member best off. "What are you—"

"Hold on," Deidara panted. He really needed to catch his breath. After a few grateful gulps of air, even if it was warm and dry, he straightened and looked at the Uchiha. "I headed for the nearest cover, yeah. You fit the bill."

"Comforting."

"What is this stuff? The Bijuu don't seem to like it much, yeah."

"*Amaterasu*," he replied quietly, turning back to the black flames. Both the Ichibi and the Yonbi were pacing back and forth on the other side of the fire. Occasionally one of them would try to get through, but would only get burnt in the process.

"It can burn pure chakra?" Deidara asked, impressed against his will.

"It can burn anything. And it won't stop burning for another week. But they'll get through it before then."

"Good thing I can fly, then, yeah," he said cheerfully, holding out the owl in his palm. Itachi rolled his eyes, ignoring the gust that the bird's wings created as Deidara left.

-.-.-

"Let me go! I-I have to help him!" Hinata screamed, trying to get away. But Neji was physically stronger than her, and was using that against her.

"What are you going to *do*, Hinata?! It's a massacre down there! You'll only end up getting yourself killed!"

"I *have* to do *something*!" She finally relented, ceasing her struggling. Instead she collapsed on her knees, sobbing. "De-Deidara-kun is—he's my friend! He-He's like a brother to me, an-and he's going to *die*!" she wailed, unable to really comprehend what she was saying.

"What about me, Hinata? You call me your brother, and you're just going to leave?" Neji asked harshly, sitting down beside her to make sure she didn't try getting away again. "You're acting stupid, and you know it! Try to think!"

"I-I can't, he's going to die, and I can't do anything...!"

"He is doing this for you, for Amegakure. All of them are."

"They're not so noble!" Hinata cried, jumping to her feet. She didn't take a step before Neji caught her around the legs, and she fell into the grass. "Th-They can't get away, they're not sacrificing themselves! They can't get away, they are just being ki-killed by the Bijuu!" She wouldn't believe that they were purposely staying behind to stall. It couldn't be true. It would be too cruel.

"Hinata, use some logic! What do you stand to gain by this?" he snapped, keeping her pinned to the ground.

"I need to help him! He's always helped me, and he's saved my life, and—he's Deidara-kun! I have to help him! Pl-Please..." She cut herself off, crying into the grass. He was going to die. He was going to leave her too. Kurenai-sensei, Kabuto-kun, Naruto-kun, Midori-chan; they all left her. All of her friends and classmates and family were dead. Konohagakure was dead. All she had left was Deidara and the friendship they had.

"What about me?" Neji asked suddenly, cutting into her train of thought. "What do you think I feel about the entire thing? Sasori is the closest thing I have to a friend in this city and he's out there, too! I know that you and Deidara are close, but there's no reason to throw your life away because of that!"

He wouldn't understand. She and Deidara shared a special bond. Ever since they met, really, it had been a different relationship. He had fought for her. He'd saved her life. He'd fought against her. They had gone on missions together, went on dates, even; they were more than best friends. Hinata wasn't sure what they were, but she wasn't going to let Deidara do something as stupid as sacrifice his life for hers. The kunoichi brought her hands together—Neji had not pinned them to her sides as he should have—and disappeared out from under his foot with a *Shunshin*.

"I am going to save Deidara-kun, and you can't stop me!" she cried shrilly, as a departing note. She probably should have just ran for it. Instead, Neji full-out tackled her, and then both went tumbling over the edge of the cliff. Hinata's fall was arrested quickly, though, as he stuck himself to the rock face with his chakra by the feet, and he was holding her upright by her hands. Still, she wasn't worried about falling. Somehow, she doubted that he would just drop her.

"Hinata please, don't make me watch you do this," Neji said quietly. His hair was falling over his shoulders, shielding his face from her view. "Don't make me watch you kill yourself."

"I'm not going to—I just need to help—Deidara-kun, he—"

"It's suicide! You know that! If you go out there, you *aren't* coming back! Neither is Deidara!" he barked. "You will both die, then and there."

Hinata had once had to choose which to go with, Neji or Deidara. That choice seemed so tame, now. But it was the same situation, all over again, just with higher stakes. Who really meant more to her? This was so much different than that lonely little rock on the edge of Earth land, as she'd watched Neji throw Deidara over the cliff. Now she was the one hanging from the edge of a cliff, and again, Neji was the one holding all of the cards.

And it finally hit her, really, that she would *die*. Her life would end. Unless Deidara performed another miracle, or Pein found a way to put the leash back on his pets, she really wouldn't come back. There was no chance that she could make it out of there. She wouldn't see Kisho or Seishirou again.

She wouldn't see Neji again.

Hinata didn't say anything, and instead looked down. She was hanging over the edge of the cliff, the outskirts of Amegakure below her toes. And behind her, the Bijuu were destroying the Akatsuki. Slaughtering them. It was the Ame war, all over again. Only this time, they were the ones losing.

When neither of them said anything for quite some time, he finally pulled her back up onto solid ground. And instead of letting her go or even pinning her again, Neji just pulled her into his arms, embracing her tightly. Hinata was caught off guard by the sudden hug—after all, since when did Hyuuga Neji, of all people, hug people at random?—but slowly relaxed into it, and then wrapped her arms around him.

Hinata then started crying. Not sobbing, or wailing, like earlier, but just let the tears trickle down her cheeks, slowly being absorbed by the fabric on his shoulder. Neji was shaking; she could have sworn that he was crying, too. But more likely than not, he wasn't. Neji didn't cry, after all. He was too strong.

Goodbye, Deidara-kun, she thought, for his sake. Goodbye, Akatsuki. Thank you for trying to save the world.

-.-.-

Konan didn't know how it had happened, but it had happened. She had just been safe and sound, with Pein, explaining herself, when Deidara's giant dragon detonated. She was tossed into the air like a rag doll, but luckily caught herself on a pair of paper wings. Then a golden-colored tail knocked her out of the air and into the ground.

The Rokubi stood over her, baring its sharp teeth mere meters from her body. The weasel crouched down, until its snout was poking her stomach. "Oh, fallen angel," the Rokubi growled happily. "Shall I rip out your wings? Or would you like them burned off?"

Konan disappeared in a flurry of papers, reappearing in the sky above the demon. She soared out towards the forest; it had rapidly become the most important part of this battle. Even if it was being destroyed at an alarming pace. Her hair had fallen out of its bun some time ago and was in her eyes, but she just pushed it behind an ear and glanced back over her shoulder for any signs of pursuit.

Then a bolt of lightning came down from the sky and hit her squarely between the shoulder blades.

She fell, barely conscious, only aware of the fact that her paper wings were burning from the sudden electricity. She couldn't get airborne again. The smell of burning paper woke her, but only slightly, before she hit the ground.

Konan bounced, and the Rokubi caught her in his jaws on the second one. It wasn't snapping her in half, but instead just applied enough pressure to keep her there. The golden weasel pranced over towards the nearest Bijuu—the Hachibi—and growled around the kunoichi in its mouth, "Look what I caught. A fallen angel. How are you doing with *your* ninja?"

The Hachibi just snorted, and then stuck out his tongue at the other. "You haven't even killed her yet."

"Yet," the Rokubi replied, six tails waving. "Better than what you're doing, though."

Konan, by then, was fully conscious again, albeit in pain. The demon's sharp teeth were dug into her skin, and her back flared with pain from the lightning with every movement. But she was still alive, and she was conscious. That was good, wasn't it?

So she did the only thing she could think of, considering her position. Konan simultaneously melted into papers, watching the Rokubi's jaws snap shut, and used them to open the weasel's mouth further. She cut from the corner of his mouth until she hit bone, making the demon howl in pain. It wasn't going to gloat to the others anymore; when it tried to catch her again, its jaws were snapping shut with enough force to halve her. She was flecked with the beast's blood with the movement, but she managed to reappear and get away with another set of wings.

Another bolt of lightning nearly got her again, and she only sidestepped it by luck alone. But at least now she was on the lookout for more attacks from nature. Konan weaved in and out of the lightning as it struck the ground below, barely keeping ahead of the irate Rokubi.

But she knew she could outrun it only so long.

The Rokubi fired two bolts of electricity at her, and as she was dodging one of them, flew directly into the second. This time, she was much closer to the ground, so she merely skidded to a halt before her paper wings had even finished burning. She shed them as she stood up, shaking her head to clear her vision.

Then, the six-tailed demon was upon her.

Konan didn't move. She knew any attempts at dodging would be futile. The Rokubi was too close, moving too fast, and she was still dazed and injured. She would die, then. Like any good kunoichi, she wasn't afraid of death. Merely sad that she couldn't see Seishirou one last time—

Then there was someone in front of her.

Pein finished signing whatever it was he had started, and held out both hands. A gale of wind shot out of his palms, strong enough to push him backward a few steps. And maybe it was the strength of the jutsu, or maybe it was the fact that lightning-based chakras were weak against wind jutsus, but it was enough to blow the Rokubi into the air. And the demon landed on the Gobi, their two differently charged electricity chakras mixing and resulting in an explosion.

Pein sunk to one knee, panting. "Damn, I haven't used that jutsu in years..." he muttered, then pulled himself back up. He turned to Konan, "Are you alright?"

"Y-You saved me," she replied, eyes wide. That was one of the few results of the prior situation she hadn't been expecting.

"Of course I did," he replied, and for a brief moment, and in the way he said the words with a smile, Konan could have sworn he was Yahiko. Or maybe she was just delirious.

"Look out!" She pushed them both down onto the ground as an angry arc of lightning shot just where their heads had been. She could feel her hair frizz a bit from the proximity of the attack. Konan jumped back to her feet, helping Pein back up, and turned and ran without another word. She still was tightly grasping his hand, and was pulling him along behind her. The blunette could sense more than see or hear the Rokubi (and maybe even Gobi) pursuing them.

She barely heard Pein shouting behind her. "Retreat, all Akatsuki, retreat! Retreat you idiots!" It was easier said than done. Maybe, *maybe* Zetsu and Deidara could get away, if they were fast enough, but that was it. Without a miracle, no one else was going to escape this.

Lightning struck just in front of her, and she barely stopped in time to avoid it. Pein ran into her back, pushing her forward a few steps, into the slight crater that the strike made. She lost her footing, but he hauled her back upright, just as the Rokubi and Gobi came upon them. Both shinobi turned around to face the two demons. Pein stood protectively in front of his partner.

"A fallen angel *and* a fallen god. How lucky are we?" the Rokubi growled, baring its bloody teeth. The Gobi nodded, panting slightly. Both weasel and canine advanced on the two like the predators they were.

This time, Konan knew, they were done for. Pein had only gotten the Rokubi away last time because he had already made the signs for his jutsu, and he'd had the element of surprise. He had neither now. The woman couldn't help but frown; would her child really grow up parentless now?

By some stroke of luck, the Gobi was a dog. A very excitable, curious dog. Zetsu used that to his advantage, popping up out of the ground near them just long enough for it to look like an accident. The Kusa-nin disappeared again, reappearing on the opposite side of the battlefield. The Gobi bounded after him, all five tails wagging with the possibility of catching the ninja who had captured it in the first place. After all, the Bijuu were primarily after their own targets. Even now, sharing and cooperating were not in their nature.

The Rokubi snarled at the fleeing Gobi, six tails lashing out angrily behind it. Konan and Pein took the opportunity to try to sneak away. Or rather, got underneath the weasel, confusing it for a brief moment. Then both Akatsuki members attacked upward, into the chakra beast's belly, with their quickest, strongest attacks. Konan had only time to create a paper lance, but she did manage to impale the demon with it. Pein had used the same wind jutsu as earlier and sent the Rokubi flying across the battlefield.

"Come on," he said breathlessly, pulling her towards the remaining trees.

That's when the Kyuubi caught up with him once more.

Without Madara, it seemed as if the fox was intent on destroying the other leader of the Akatsuki. The scarlet demon was hiding in the cover of the trees, using their own shelter against them, and lashed out with its tails when they got close enough. The Kyuubi then stood up, the movement causing most of the trees to be uprooted, destroying one of their last places of cover.

Both Konan and Pein gracefully jumped over the first tail. The second tail tried to catch them in midair, but Konan created another set of paper wings, ignoring how much it hurt to fly, and both swerved her own body and tossed Pein higher into the air for him to dodge. The third was aimed solely at her, and she had to fly backward, away from Pein to get away from it.

It's trying to separate us, she realized, narrowing her eyes. Konan purposely flew straight at the tail, going under it at the last moment, close enough for her to feel the chakra tingle in her skin. Pein had already landed and had back flipped out of the way of another tail, avoiding death yet again. The Kyuubi almost seemed pleased; it appeared to like playing with them.

Konan created an origami sword, using it in midair to slice the tip of one of the tails off. The fox was no longer amused, and howled in rage. It was a superficial wound, *if* that, but just the fact that someone had managed to injure it was probably a much greater blow on the demon's ego. She turned, in time to see one of the other tails streaking towards her, narrowed and pointed like a sword. The Kyuubi intended to spear her with a tail, of all things. But she supposed, if one had nine tails, why not use the most readily available weapon?

I do think too much like a shinobi sometimes, she realized. Konan almost wished, briefly, that she would have acted less like a kunoichi during her lifetime. But she supposed that Seishirou was enough for her; she again lamented that her child would not have a mother. Hopefully Pein would get away and raise their son. Because this time, there was no dodging this. There was no Zetsu to draw the demon off and distract the other, there was no time to make any jutsu, there wasn't anything but the spear-shaped tail coming towards her.

Konan felt something hit her shoulder, and she fell out of the air. The blunette woman turned in shock—Pein had jumped up and pushed her out of the way.

The Kyuubi's tail went right through him, the tip a few meters out of his body on the other side. The fox almost seemed surprised at this self-sacrificial behavior, but obviously it hadn't known Pein. He had used that name to take away others' pain, he wanted to become the god to protect his citizens and city, Pein had wanted to create a war-free world. He almost seemed like a pacifist. But he definitely was noble enough to think that self-sacrifice was a good idea. Konan had just never thought he'd put it into practice.

The Kyuubi scraped him off of its tail, stepping forward with a sharp grin. "Such foolish valor, Pein. I had thought you were smarter than that."

Konan ran towards where Pein had fallen. She knelt beside him, ignoring the demon that was hovering over them both. "I-I couldn't..." he rasped, his ringed eyes sliding closed. She had no idea he was even still alive; she leaned closer to him, trying to hear what he was trying to say. "I couldn't... change the world... I'm sorry... Konan..."

Then the Kyuubi was thrown backwards by an earth jutsu. Konan ignored it. Pein's eyes didn't close; they just remained half-open, as if he was studying something or about to fall asleep. She put her hand on his chest—or what remained of it—and tried to feel for a heartbeat she knew wasn't there. "Pein, Pein, come on, wake up..."

As the demon was getting back up, the Ichibi was thrown into it. And then the Sanbi.

Konan was aware of people surrounding her. There was a lull in the battlefield clamor, and she could only hear growling and a few approaching footsteps. Zetsu was the first one to enter her field of vision. "He's... *dead*."

"Leader-sama is *dead*?" she heard Hidan say behind her. "Jashin—"

"No!" Konan turned around fiercely to him. "You will not taint this with your heathen god's prayers, Hidan!"

The immortal backed up a step, surprised by the outburst. He didn't offer a reply.

"That's three dead, then," Itachi said, stepping up behind them. He was rubbing a hand at one eye, blood trailing down from it. "And none of us are in any shape to continue this battle. Our best chances at survival are gone."

"Pein had ordered a retreat," Konan said quietly, turning back to the body in front of her. "Twice."

No one said anything. They didn't even move. Behind the group, the demons were getting up out of their dog pile, stalking their motionless targets. They were converging on them, bodies close to the ground, tails sticking high in the air, like some sort of twisted housecat.

"So what are you *waiting* for?! *Get out of here!*" Konan screamed at them. With the sudden noise, the Bijuu all pounced. The Akatsuki members scattered, effectively getting out of the way. All of them, except Konan. She remained kneeling by Pein's body, her paper wings forming a sort of shield around both of them.

She didn't get out as the demons pounced. She remained with Pein, as she always had.

-.-.-

Itachi rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear them of blood and sweat as he ran. He was heading for the farthest forest cover possible, since he knew if he wasn't caught on the way, it would be the last place searched.

So the Akatsuki was disbanded. Basically. Practically. Kisame, Tobi, even Pein and Konan were all dead. How many others would die in the retreat attempt? Itachi didn't particularly care. He just rubbed at his eyes again, and tried to stay upright. His vision was getting fuzzy, but he knew he had to keep running if he wanted to survive the night. No time to stop and try to fix his eyes.

Itachi made it to the forest. He didn't bother jumping into the trees; the Bijuu wouldn't track by mere footprints, and he didn't think he'd risk messing up a jump and breaking his leg. He circled around until he was heading toward Amegakure again, just to keep an eye on things. Undoubtedly the Bijuu would go for the villagers once they couldn't catch any of the others. It was their turn to be the bait.

Even with his vision shot, Itachi's other senses were as sharp as ever. He heard something to his right, and froze on the spot, listening hard. He even shut off the Mangekyou, trying to improve his vision. (It did improve, but only slightly.) He could make out someone standing in amongst the trees, completely still, like he was.

Then, he heard a soft voice. "Itachi..." It was female, and he had definitely heard it before. Why did it sound so familiar? Regardless of who it belonged to, it rang warning bells. Itachi turned and ran, aiming to go around the woman. He could still outrun anyone in the village, that he knew.

Then he recognized the voice. Karin. The kunoichi who had accompanied Sasuke and Suigetsu. Itachi's eyes widened, and he ducked just in time to avoid the giant sword that had been about to decapitate him. He kicked upward with his duck, catching Suigetsu under the chin, and sending him into the treetops. If they were here, then that meant...

Itachi kept low to the ground, and ran for all he was worth. He was in no condition to fight. Moreover, a fight now would only attract the attention of the Bijuu, who would come and kill all of them. But he had seen Karin and Suigetsu, so where was Sasuke?

At least his vision was clearing. At a slow pace, but at least it was a steady pace. He could now distinguish individual leaves on the bushes and trees he passed, and only a slight fuzz remained. And a slight stinging, but Itachi chalked that up to using *Amaterasu* twice in one night.

Then, Itachi finally found his little brother. He was standing across the clearing he'd just run into, Suigetsu and Karin standing behind him. The elder Uchiha stopped, trying to stop himself from panting. Since when did the Sharingan and running tire him out? He must be getting old. "Itachi," Sasuke said levelly.

"Sasuke, not now." Itachi shook his head. Even Sasuke must realize that if they fought now, the Bijuu would find them.

"This will be quick. You shouldn't worry about the Bijuu. They're already moving towards Amegakure." Sasuke's voice was still level, but his eyes were glinting dangerously. At least they were still black.

But if the Bijuu *did* find them, then they would all die. Itachi didn't care about himself—he knew he would probably die soon anyway, with the state his body was in—but Sasuke and his two young companions. They couldn't get away from the demons. They would all be slain. But then, as Itachi thought about it, he realized that his plan for his fight was now moot. He had planned on letting Sasuke kill him. But what would that accomplish now? And he had no village to return to as a hero.

Moreover, Tobi was dead. Madara. Itachi had known all along that the masked shinobi was really Uchiha Madara, and now he was dead. The last two Uchiha were both standing in this clearing. He had no more complications.

The Akatsuki was disbanded. Konohagakure and Amegakure were (or would be) both destroyed. Madara was dead. There was no reason for them to even *fight* now. Maybe it was the blood loss or strain of using the Sharingan too much, but Itachi couldn't even see a reason to fight Sasuke now. It would accomplish absolutely nothing.

He couldn't help himself. Itachi bent over, laughing. There were no more people to fool. Not even Kisame. No more Konoha-nin, no more Uchiha, just him and Sasuke. Even half the Akatsuki members were dead. What was to stop him?

As he straightened, he noticed that his laughter had probably scared the three shinobi opposite him. But he didn't care. What would they matter? They couldn't understand, anyway. All his life, putting on a charade for some group or another... and now they were all dead. No one left. Sasuke was staring at him intently, studying him. Obviously wondering whether or not he had cracked and gone insane.

Itachi would have grinned. He would have, but he didn't. Instead, it came out as a grimace.

"Sasuke..." he said, and then cleared his throat and tried again. He rubbed at his eyes again, too, trying to ignore the stinging. "Sasuke, don't you see?"

"See what?" he asked suspiciously, narrowing his eyes, his hand tightening on his sword's hilt. Itachi turned off the Sharingan completely, the grimace relaxing into a small, gentle smile. Sasuke was still too easily read.

"We don't have to fight."

"What are you *talking* about?" he snarled, activating his own Sharingan.

"Everyone is dead. There's no reason to fight."

Sasuke didn't say anything in reply to that. He just scowled darkly. Itachi stared evenly back at his brother, noticing suddenly how much hatred filled his eyes. Hatred that would only get in the way now. But it acted as a bucket of cold water on him; Itachi knew, then, that he had done too good of a job protecting Sasuke. With all of this hatred and a plan for his future, Itachi had never thought of a time when it all wouldn't *matter*. He was too good at his job.

Itachi smiled again, this time for a different reason. He had seen reason. He knew Sasuke would not be swayed. Right now, all he could hope was that the Bijuu didn't notice. He resigned himself to the fate he chose for his little brother. Even if it didn't matter now.

It hurt him, but somehow he said the words that needed to be said. "You're still weak, Sasuke." *Even though I can see how strong you've become.* "You lack the skills or hatred to kill me right now." *Even though your hatred was my idea, my plan for you.*

Suigetsu and Karin both took a step forward, but Sasuke put out an arm that stopped them both. "Karin, keep on the lookout for the Bijuu. Suigetsu, just stay out of our way."

At least he had the sense to keep an eye out for the demons. Itachi reactivated his Sharingan, ignoring how it stung his eyes. He resisted the urge to rub at them. "This will be quick, Sasuke. I doubt it will gain their attention."

"You're right; this will be quick," Sasuke replied, sinking into a fighting stance as he drew his sword.

"You're still foolish, little brother," Itachi said dispassionately. *Foolish because you don't trust your older brother to know what's right for you.*

"Shut up! You know nothing about me, except that you know I will kill you to avenge our clan!"

Itachi nearly told him the truth, then and there. But he had never been a weak person, so he just kept his mouth shut. And then Sasuke charged.

--.-

Neji, thankfully, had gotten the right idea. Go northeast, circle around the Bijuu. Of course, he was a strategist, and knew the right course of action. A sparse few of the smarter shinobi also headed in that direction, or even southeast. But they had all gotten a head start. By the time they were done with their argument, the Bijuu were already advancing on Amegakure.

Hinata scooped up Seishirou, putting a quick sleeping genjutsu on him. Kisho followed along at their heels, keeping tabs on the Bijuu for them. Neji hurried them along, Byakugan active, making sure that they weren't in immediate danger. Hinata was painfully silent, just hugging the sleeping infant tightly to her chest, and sniffing occasionally. Just as they were getting into the northern forests and lakes, the Bijuu reached Amegakure.

Even though it was empty—and they had to have known that—they gleefully destroyed it, taking their time doing so. It only gave the fleeing shinobi and civilians time to get away. But it wasn't much time. With nine demons and one little village, it was soon so much rubble. And then they headed westward, where the majority of the refugees had gone.

Dimly, the small group could hear a few roars and howls, but they were out of peril for now. They

continued on silently, through the lush forest that had escaped the previous war, keeping on their toes for any sign of danger. Kisho and Neji took turns being the scout, but there was absolutely nothing in the forest. Most of the animals had fled when the Bijuu appeared, and the only sound was their own footsteps and the raindrops on the leaves high above them.

After a few hours, Seishirou woke up. They decided to stop there, then, for the night. Or rather, day; it was already dawn. Hinata wearily sat down, cradling the baby in her arms, tears running down her cheeks. "Everyone's dead, aren't they?" she asked quietly. It was the first words she'd spoken in over three hours. "Deidara-kun, Itachi-senpai, Konan-senpai, even Leader-sama..."

"Maybe. ...Probably. There's a chance that Zetsu or Deidara could have gotten away. Hidan might survive, too," Neji replied airily, trying to keep his voice light. He failed at that. "Kisho, if Itachi dies, are you going to disappear?"

"No. Until I get hit by something or choose to disappear, I'm not going anywhere. In which case, neither of you are cat summoners, so I probably won't be coming back," the feline replied, pausing in his bath. With his muddy toes, he had taken the break as a chance to lick them off, and that had rapidly turned into a full-body bath. "So... where are you going to go now? Another shinobi village? It'll be what, your third?"

"No, no village is safe," Neji said darkly. The Bijuu would definitely go for the villages first. Probably Suna or Iwa next, as they were the closest. "The wilderness would be the safest."

"Where, though?"

"Up north. It's mountainous up there."

Hinata said nothing in agreement or disagreement. She just ran her fingers lightly over Seishirou's head, combing his unruly hair.

Kisho continued his bath, calmly ignoring the two awkwardly silent humans. Neji ran a hand through his hair, before tying it back again. It had come out of its ponytail some time ago. Hinata fished a bottle out of her bag, offering it to Seishirou, and the infant greedily took it.

"Hinata... were you really going to go try to rescue Deidara?" Neji asked presently.

She blinked slowly, keeping her white eyes on Seishirou. "...Yes, I think so."

"Why?"

"Because... Deidara-kun is... He's my best friend. I think one of my only *real* friends. He saw me first and foremost as Hinata—or 'Bya-chan'—and secondly as the Hyuuga heir, or even a Konoha kunoichi. He cares about me."

"So would a puppy," he remarked sourly.

"But Deidara-kun, he's... I don't know how to describe it, I really don't. We were just meant for each other. I love him. He's my Deidara-kun," she continued, almost ignoring his remark.

"'Meant for each other'. Like... fate," he said softly.

Hinata looked up at him, surprised at the word. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"I spoke without thinking. I apologize." Neji said it stiffly, not looking at her.

Hinata gently set Seishirou down, using her bag as a pillow. He watched her with his ringed eyes, still sucking on the bottle. She walked over to Neji, sitting in front of him, trying to look into his eyes. "You don't still think that, do you...?"

"If it wasn't not Deidara, it was Naruto. I was almost tired of the competition."

"What do you think we have, then?" she asked seriously. "Naruto-kun... is dead. And..." She left it off at that, unable to continue. Even now, Hinata couldn't say anything negative about him.

"I'm sorry. I'm not acting like myself right now. I blame it on stress," he said, attempting a smile for her sake. She smiled back at him, even if neither of them meant it. "Tonight... last night... it was... stressful."

"...Yeah," she agreed. "But, you know, neither Deidara-kun or Naruto-kun were ever what you were to me."

Neji blinked, and finally turned to look at her.

"You never heard all of the fairytale, did you? Deidara-kun is my dragon, and Naruto-kun was my white knight. But you were always my dark knight."

"In fairytales, generally the princess ends up with the white knight," he pointed out ruefully.

"Generally," she allowed, "But not always. Naruto-kun had a different princess, remember? I was never his. But you, you were a truly noble knight."

"It was my duty to protect you."

"But this goes a bit beyond duty, doesn't it?" Hinata asked, leaning against the rock he was sitting on.

"Not necessarily."

"But we're getting sidetracked. Deidara-kun was never my knight, white or dark. And as unorthodox as this fairytale is, the princess still ends up with her knight."

Neji didn't say anything for a long moment. "...I was worried, earlier. For some reason, the thought that you would go off to kill yourself for Deidara made me panic."

"I was just worried about him. I wasn't aware of what I'd be leaving behind."

"And what would that be?"

"You. And Kisho-kitty and Seishirou-chan, but I'll selfishly admit that you were the one that made me stay."

"You couldn't be selfish if you tried," he admonished. She couldn't help but smile.

"But... let's not talk about that now. I'm still sad."

"Hinata..." Neji said quietly, leaning down until he was eye level with her. "Don't ever make me have to stop you from doing that again."

"I'll try not to." She absently twirled the ring on her finger, smiling to herself now. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. For living."

"That's a horrible thing to thank someone for."

"But I'm thankful for it nonetheless." He smiled, and rubbed his cheek against hers, nuzzling into her neck. "Hinata... do you know what the first thing I ever thought about you was?"

"No, and how could you even remember such a thing?"

"I thought you were cute. I even told my father that. I still think that, though I'm not necessarily comparing you to kittens anymore."

"You thought I was cute like a kitten?" Hinata giggled. "When was this?"

"You were only three. I was four."

"I wasn't—"

"I was four." Now he seemed to regret admitting such a thing. "Nevermind."

"No, really, what were you going to say?" she asked, trying to stifle a smile. It was cute to see him embarrassed, even if the situation didn't call for it. She needed to get her mind off things, anyway.

"I was just going to say that I am glad we've made it this far together, and I sincerely hope that nothing happens to you, and, if I may borrow a line from my teammate, that I would continue to do my duty and protect you with my life. Is that satisfactory?" Neji asked, rolling his eyes.

"Okay, yes, it is." Hinata beamed at him. "Now what were you *really* going to say?" He wasn't the only one who could read people.

He looked at her, trying to figure out whether or not he should tell the truth. Finally, Neji simply stated, "I love you." And then he bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

Once upon a time, there was a princess. A beautiful princess, who deeply admired her white knight. She was the princess of a great kingdom, with many knights and friends and even a little sister.

The dragon, however, kidnapped the princess. And the princess saw the world outside of her kingdom for the first time. She was enthralled with it.

She befriended the dragon, even when her white knight came to rescue her. The dragon kept the princess, overpowering her knight. Together, they went on many adventures together, strengthening their friendship. But by then, another knight, who wasn't quite light enough to be her white knight, came to her rescue.

And it ended up that the dark knight saved the princess merely by being with her, and the dragon. They even lived with the dragons, for there were more than just hers. They even met another princess, the princess of the dragons.

And though it went against all rules of fairytales, the first princess and the first dragon remained great friends. The best of friends, in fact. All signs pointed to the fact that they shouldn't be, but they ignored those. They continued living their happy little fairytale lives. Even the dark knight,

whom the princess loved deeply, didn't appreciate her friendship with the dragon. But she couldn't give up her dragon, after all. She loved him, too.

So somehow, the princess ended up with her dark knight, and the white knight and her kingdom dying in the process.

And somehow, the princess befriended her dragon, destroying the world in the process.

-.-.-

The End

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Epilogue.

-.-.-

Ending Note: Well, how was that, folks? One hell of a rollercoaster, right? :D;; But it's basically over now. Just the epilogue-still in-story-and the credits-which is like an 'extra' chapter. But be sure to follow the rest of the storyline, and the world the Akatsuki left behind, in White Knight!

Ja ne! -heart-

Epilogue

Three Years Later...

-.-.-

"Are you sure you're up for carrying her around all day?"

"Neji, honestly, I was *pregnant* with her. I was carrying her around already. Only now it's in my arms, so it'll be much more comfortable. Isn't that right, sweetie?" The baby cooed quietly in agreement. Hinata wiggled her fingers in front of the infant's face, and she latched onto one of them with a tiny hand. The new (kind of) mother let her child suck on her finger, while she turned back to her husband. "Where's Seishirou-kun?"

They hadn't seen anyone since that day. They hadn't seen *anyone*. She knew for a fact that several members were dead, such as Itachi. Though he had died by his brother's hands instead of the Bijuu's claws. And Seishirou's parents—his biological ones—were both dead. Tobi—no, *Madara*—was dead.

As for the rest, she couldn't get any confirmation. She hadn't seen hide nor hair of anyone since the day the Bijuu broke free, and that had been three, long years ago. Hinata had given up most of her hope that any of them were still alive. After all, who could hide from the demons forever? They were hunting the Akatsuki members personally, at this point; she and Neji had only gotten away because they weren't wearing the uniform.

"We should move to Kiri," he told her once. Before Hitomi was born, they were ready to move. But Hinata couldn't bring herself to live in another shinobi village again. Now, looking down at her daughter's large, trusting, white eyes, she decided that there was strength in numbers. A shinobi village would be able to repel a demon, wouldn't it? Besides, if it had lasted three years, perhaps it'll last another three or so. Safety for her children? Something Hinata would do anything for. Even if it meant moving to Kirigakure.

The other four ninja villages were now nothing but ruins and ashes. Even Iwa, which had stayed politically neutral during the entire debacle. Kiri was the only safe haven for ninja anymore. And with that many shinobi, surely they would be able to stand up to a demon.

Someone has to be alive. Otherwise the demons wouldn't be hunting them... Hinata thought hopefully. It was probably Hidan, or Kakuzu. She couldn't bear to get her expectations up that it could be Deidara they were still searching for...

"He was outside last I saw," Neji replied, glancing out the window. "Yes, he's outside. Playing in the mud."

"Lovely." Hinata thought of yet another outfit she'd have to wash of his. Maybe it was time he stopped wearing such formal clothes... Hitomi babbled something quietly, still trying to gnaw toothlessly on her mother's fingers. At least her daughter would be brought up in kimonos. And Hinata would make sure that she didn't manage to get them muddy every time she went outside, too.

She carried Hitomi over to the window, letting her look outside. The infant's already large eyes widened impossibly as she took in all this new stimuli. She cooed happily. Hinata smiled warmly, looking up to wave at Seishirou when he noticed them. He waved a muddy fist back at them.

He was looking more and more like his father every day. It was almost as if Konan hadn't given him any of her genes. Though Hinata was still holding out hope that he'd take to origami. Seishirou's hair was a bit longer than his father's had been, though; it was already nearly to his chin, though it hung in the same spikes that Pein's had. Hinata didn't want to cut it shorter, just in case he really *did* start looking too much like the deceased leader.

Seishirou's ringed eyes watched his adoptive mother for a few moments longer, and then returned to his mud. Hinata debated briefly on whether or not to take Hitomi outside; it was a beautiful day outside, with sun shining and birds twittering happily in the sky above their house. But what if she caught a chill? There had been a chilly breeze earlier in the morning...

Neji held out a blanket for her, and Hinata thanked him with a smile. He could *still* read her all too easily.

The family sat outside in the warm sunshine, just basking. Hitomi kept blinking her white eyes in the sunlight, unsure of what to make of it. She then watched Seishirou playing in the mud for nearly the entire time, occasionally making happy baby sounds.

"Do you still want to move to Kirigakure?" Hinata asked quietly. Neji nodded without looking at her. His head was tilted back, leaning on one shoulder, as he closed his eyes. "In a month or so, why don't we?"

"Why don't we..." he murmured in agreement. Hinata smiled at him. He looked just like a cat, sprawled out in the sun. Which reminded her; Kisho was still missing. He'd ran off earlier that day because he didn't approve of the first thing Hitomi doing was pulling on his whiskers.

"Mama, look." Seishirou held up something created out of mud, looking pleased.

"Oh, such a wonderful... snake." Hinata guessed, honestly having no idea what it really was.

"It's a *flower*. Like that one over there." He pointed to one of the wild flowers near the edge of the hill.

Maybe there's more Konan in him than I realized, she thought wonderingly.

"And such a lovely flower," she amended. "Is it for me?"

"No! I want it to be for Hitomi-chan!" Seishirou proclaimed.

"Well, maybe she can have it later. She's still all clean, see?" The infant cooed in her mother's arms once more, still immaculate. As opposed to her brother, who looked down at his mud-covered outfit with an air of discovery.

"Where's Kisho?" the ginger-haired boy asked, looking around.

"I'm sure he'll be home eventually," Neji replied without opening his eyes. "Around dinner time, I assume."

And, as if summoned, the cat came trotting triumphantly up the hill near the corner of the house. He had something in his mouth by the neck, and Hinata stood up with a groan. She did *not* want her children exposed to more dead animals than they had to be. As he came closer, striped tail held

high behind him, she recognized it as a bird, which was still fluttering weakly. Even better; now she'd have to snap the poor thing's neck to take it out of its misery.

Kisho trotted up, and Hinata turned around so Hitomi wouldn't have to see. "Hey, don't do that to me, Hime-chan. I thought you'd be happy with this."

"Why would I be happy with a dead bird—"

"Hinata." Neji's voice cut through her own, and she turned to him curiously. He hadn't adopted that tone of voice since he told her to get out of Ame.

Then, her heart honestly must have skipped a beat when she realized what that must mean. She slowly turned around, unconsciously clutching Hitomi a bit tighter to her, and looked down at her feet.

A tawny bird with hollow eyes and made out of clay.

She slowly broke into a grin.

-.-.-

"Mama, they have a *huge* bird!" Seishirou cried excitedly, rushing out to try to pet it.

"How else do you think we get around, yeah?" Deidara asked as he slid down from the bird. He stretched for a moment, grinning contentedly as he heard the appropriate joints crack and pop. Sasori slid down behind him, looking rather irritable and windblown. He still hated flying, of course.

The blonde looked up to see two—no, *three*—Hyuuga waiting for him. He blinked in surprise, raising both eyebrows. Hinata stepped up to face him, holding a suspiciously baby-shaped bundle in her arms. "You multiplied," he said tactlessly.

She frowned at him, sighing. Neji stepped up behind her, muttering, "At least you missed most of the pregnancy..." Deidara chuckled, reaching over and ruffling his hair. He did not look amused with this and shot him a nasty glare.

"Good, you're still the same old ba—" Hinata clamped a hand over his mouth, downright glaring at him. Deidara was surprised, needless to say. Not quite how he expected their reunion.

"No swearing in front of the children," she said in a low voice, narrowing her eyes. He looked down to see Seishirou staring up at him with curious eyes.

Sasori saved him. He took the three-year-old's hand and led him away, asking him conversationally, "Have you been playing in the mud?"

"No, making mud things," Seishirou replied cheerfully.

"Oh? Does that mean you're an artist?"

The other three watched this with amazement. "I thought... that *you* were the one that was good with children."

"I thought I was, too, yeah," Deidara replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "Though I wouldn't put it past danna to turn the kid into a puppet. You might want to keep an eye on him."

Inside, Deidara was instantly into everything. He first took in Takamaru's feather, which was mounted on the wall on one of the living room's walls. He didn't say anything about that, and instead looked at the sculptures.

"Did you make these, Bya-chan?" he asked, poking one of the inanimate birds in the head.

She laughed. "No, you did. I cleaned out your room in Ame before the Bijuu destroyed it all."

He grinned, picking it up with the air of something made of glass. It had been years since he'd seen one of his own birds of this style; he'd dropped it long ago in favor of a sleeker, modified crow. It seemed like it'd belong in a museum now. Deidara moved on to the next thing, a row of pictures hanging on the wall. One of Seishirou, looking to be about two. He was waving a toy kunai in the air, while Hinata was laying on the ground, pretending to be slain.

One of Neji holding the little girl, obviously taken not too long ago. He was looking down at the infant with a mixture of contentment and a bit of surprise, as if Hinata had just handed him the kid and taken the picture a moment afterward. Deidara grimaced, trying not to laugh.

The next picture he recognized. "Hey, this is..."

"Yes, it is," Hinata said. She had come up behind him while he was looking at things.

It was the picture that girl—what was her name? Usuki? Uzula?—took of the three of them. Deidara, Hinata and Kabuto. After he'd fought Kisame and Itachi, and right after they met up with the medic. Hinata was in the middle, one of Deidara's arms around her shoulders, and Kabuto's arm around her waist. She seemed absolutely mortified with this arrangement, if the color of her face was anything to go by. She looked so young... they all did. Deidara was grinning, and even Kabuto had a smirk that wasn't quite as devious as his usual one had been.

Deidara moved on to the next picture. He was probably getting too emotional over these things; after all, they were only photographs. The next one contained Neji and Hinata, arms wrapped around each other, both of them dressed in white. The blonde huffed, but then another sculpture caught his attention and he ran off to study that one.

Next to the dove—which was lopsided and actually Hinata's this time—a hare ANBU mask lay, under a few papers and a fine layer of dust. Deidara moved said papers and dust, picking the mask up. It was chipped in places and the paint was faded, but it was definitely her hare mask.

"Do you throw *anything* away, yeah? Ever?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"I like the memories." Hinata was behind him again, this time offering up a thick book. He took it, confused. "That one you'll probably recognize more. Less of Seishirou-kun and Hitomi-chan."

"Is that the girl's name?" he asked, looking at the infant who was now in Neji's arms.

"Yes."

"I thought you were naming your firstborn after that girl who took that picture, yeah."

Hinata laughed, though she had a valiant battle trying not to. "That was—that was *our* firstborn, she said. Remember, she thought we were married?"

Deidara shrugged it off, and jumped over the back of the couch, landing on it with the book in his lap. Hinata snorted at the behavior, but he ignored that. "So what have you been doing, yeah? Besides, you know, having a kid. Which I would have expected to know about."

"I didn't know where you were!" she exclaimed, frowning.

"We thought you were dead," Neji added flatly, sitting down in a chair opposite them. Hitomi smiled rapidly, as if in agreement with the statement.

"Excuses, excuses." Deidara flipped open the book, though he really was more intent on conversation right now. Three years was a long time, after all. But most of that died when he saw what the book really was; it was a photo album. The first picture was one Deidara had made Sasori take on Hinata's sixteenth birthday. He remembered it. He was kissing Hinata on the cheek, while she was a brilliant shade of red, clearly caught off guard by the move. "Why... why do you still have these?"

"Maybe to show Seishirou-kun when he's old enough. Mostly because I told you, I like the memories..."

Deidara flipped the page, fascinated. The next picture he also vividly remembered; it was the same scenario, only the characters were switched. Neji had snapped a picture of Sasori giving Deidara a kiss in the library, while the blonde was blushing furiously. Deidara blushed again, just looking at the picture, and then looked at Hinata. He hadn't ever told her about Sasori and him...

She just smiled, though he could have sworn Neji had just laughed at him. "I thought it was a cute picture," she said simply.

"Yeah... well... you're not showing that one to Seishirou."

The next picture was of Itachi, clearly having been taken at random and spontaneously. He had just turned to the camera, mouth open slightly and a look of faint astonishment was in his eyes. The one after that, Konan, similarly taken. Though she seemed irritable, hair unkempt and wearing Pein's uniform. Her belly was just barely visible underneath the baggy clothing.

There were various pictures of the Akatsuki members, some in full uniform, a full in not-so-full. A couple of Midori, one of her with Daisuke. Several of Hinata in varying of shades of red. One of Sasori sitting on top of Hiruko, looking like he was explaining something. Probably something about art, judging on his expression. One of Neji, his hand over most of the camera's lens, looking angry. Deidara stopped and laughed at most of them concerning him, because he remembered them.

And then, towards the end, there were pictures of other people. Konoha people. A little white-eyed, dark-haired girl, the girl he recognized as Hinata's little sister. The guy with the dog—though in this picture, the dog wasn't so large—and the guy with the five coats too many, with a much younger Hinata in the middle. One of her sensei, the red-eyed woman he had mistakenly took for an Uchiha. Even one of Sasuke and the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki, having what appeared to be a glaring contest. A younger Neji, looking considerably colder, and steadily ignoring a glare from a bowl cut sporting, green spandex clad ninja behind him.

"You must really like memories, yeah," Deidara remarked uncertainly. He didn't even know where she had gotten a lot of them, especially the ones from Konoha. Where the village had stood was now nothing more than a crater, so it would have been impossible to sneak back into the village to retrieve such items.

"It was just us here. It was all I had." Hinata looked down at her lap. Deidara glanced sideways at her, looking at how much older she'd become. Still young by anyone's standards, but one could see it in her eyes. She had seen too much. "But! You're here now, Deidara-kun."

"Yeah," he agreed with a grin.

"Do you want to hold Hitomi-chan?" she asked suddenly, catching him off guard. Deidara blinked, and before he could reply, found himself holding a very tiny little girl. To make matters worse, Hinata had sent Neji off to find the camera, presumably to add another picture to her album.

Luckily, Sasori, led by a very muddy Seishirou, came in at that time and saved him. Deidara eagerly passed the child back to her mother—he liked children, and all, but not holding them. "You're both more mud than person, yeah."

"And this is after we've cleaned up a bit, I can assure you," Sasori sighed.

"Both of you, outside! You're not going to track mud into my house! Seishirou, you know better!" Hinata scolded, standing up and shaking her free finger at them both. Sasori wasn't pleased with being scolded, but he was forcibly led back outside by her. Deidara snickered at his expense.

She grabbed the hose and once again passed Hitomi on to Deidara. He just held the child, completely still, as if scared he'd break her. Hinata then turned on the hose, and turned it on both Seishirou and Sasori. Sasori hadn't been expecting her to actually do that, and ducked under the water's sharp stream to hide behind Deidara. The blonde had no doubt that he would be soaked as well right then if he wasn't holding Hitomi.

Once the boys were all clean—or mostly Seishirou, who thought it was absolutely hilarious to get clean via hose and didn't understand why Sasori didn't like it—Hinata finally let them in the house again. "I've never seen Bya-chan take charge, yeah. At least not that way."

"Hn," Sasori grunted. He wasn't inclined to start speaking until he was completely dry again, apparently.

"It's your own fault, yeah."

"Deidara-kun, you seem to be doing fine with Hitomi-chan now. See? She's not so scary." He looked down at the large eyes staring up at him from his arms. He'd almost forgotten that he was holding the kid. Deidara hastily passed her off to Sasori, who merely offered her back to her mother.

"You spoke too soon and spooked him," Neji remarked with a rue smirk. Deidara stuck his tongue out at him in response. (He was going to give him the finger as well, but as Seishirou was in the room, he had a feeling Hinata wouldn't appreciate that.)

"Do you always dress them in formal clothes?" Sasori asked, looking down at the three-year-old. Seishirou grinned up at him, and then went back to playing with some sort of puzzle game. He had already been stripped of his wet, still-slightly-muddy clothes and put into a new outfit. His hair still dripped onto it, though, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, I do," Hinata replied, warningly.

"It's cute, yeah," Deidara said quickly, covering Sasori's mouth with his hand to prevent him from saying the first thing that came to mind. Because he had a feeling he knew what that would be. The Iwa-nin quickly cast about for a topic of conversation, but Sasori ruined even that; he could only think of serious subjects.

"How did you two escape?" Neji asked, beating him to the obvious. Hinata gave him a look, but he didn't seem to mind it.

"With a bird. Duh."

"So you were a target in the air with no cover whatsoever with Bijuu who could jump above the clouds?" he asked skeptically.

Deidara sighed; he hadn't wanted to talk about this so soon. Sasori spoke, instead, before he could. "When Leader-sama died, Konan-san ordered another retreat. This one we could actually attempt. She... stayed behind, and we all scattered in different directions, so it took awhile for the Bijuu to catch up to any of us. Deidara had created two birds in addition to the one he was riding, for suitable distractions if needed. And unfortunately, he made me ride on those infernal pieces of flying mud." The blonde man grinned sheepishly; obviously Sasori *still* didn't appreciate flying. "We stayed low to the ground and headed straight south from there. We hid in Wind land for awhile, until the Bijuu destroyed Sunagakure, and then we started traveling."

"Traveling?" Neji prompted.

"Looking for other members who survived. I can tell you who was alive when the retreat was called, but that's about it. We saw Kakuzu and Hidan, once, about two years ago. We haven't seen anyone else."

"Who was alive when the retreat was called...?" Hinata asked softly.

"Us. Kakuzu, Hidan, Zetsu, Itachi."

"Itachi is dead." She said this flatly, merely reciting a fact. "Sasuke killed him just after that."

Both Akatsuki members blinked in surprise. "How do you know this, yeah? Did the cat tell you?"

"We met up with Sasuke and his team when we were looking for a place to settle down, a few months after the attack. He told us that he killed Itachi, but now the Bijuu are hunting down the rest of the members; he has no quarrel with you or any of the others."

"We know the Bijuu are still out for us. But their plans have changed," Sasori said, looking away. "At least, as of two years ago. Kakuzu figured it out first; apparently he and Hidan have been hunted most frequently, due to their immortal status."

"Plans? They... had some to begin with?" Neji asked, furrowing his brow. He clearly didn't like the sound of that.

"Originally, as far as we can tell, the Bijuu could communicate with each other in that prison. They decided on revenge, and then getting themselves all Jinchuuriki. They figure humans are excellent weapons."

"But," Deidara chimed in, "They only figured it out awhile ago, what their mistake was. With all of the shinobi villages save Kiri destroyed, and half of the Akatsuki dead, yeah, who would be their Jinchuuriki? They're smart enough to know that they don't want some chuunin."

"They're hunting you for your bodies," Hinata gasped, holding Hitomi a bit tighter to her. Deidara nodded grimly.

"That's part of why we needed to find you guys, yeah. There are nine Bijuu, and a maximum of five Akatsuki members still alive. And Sasori-danna doesn't count, but we're not sure whether or

not the demons know that. But either way, they need five more bodies. Sooner or later, they're bound to figure out that you both have connections to the Akatsuki."

"How—"

"They were Jinchuuriki, not stupid or blind. Hinata-hime came with us on the Ichibi and Sanbi missions, and she also had contact with the Nibi and Kyuubi Jinchuuriki before they were sealed. They are going to make the connection. Dark hair and white eyes are not something you forget easily," Sasori said darkly. "We came to warn you."

"Even so... that's two, and even if they think I'm worth their time." Neji narrowed his eyes, clenching his fists in his lap. "Three more—Oh. Sasuke and his team?"

"That's what we think, yeah. Again, he has had extensive contact with the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki, when he was alive, and none of them are going to forget about the last Uchiha."

"But... the Bijuu lend power to their human bodies, don't they? I mean, Naruto was only a genin, but he repeatedly beat back the Akatsuki by himself."

"That's why they want to start out with the strongest shinobi bodies they can find. An untrained rookie gets power like that from a demon. Imagine what they could do with Kakuzu's firepower, or Deidara's bombs." It didn't paint a pretty picture.

-.-.-

Sasori and Deidara stayed with them for a week. After getting used to Hitomi, Deidara started making clay animals for her and Seishirou, which the children immediately took to. Sasori and Neji caught up on each other and their journeys during their separation, taking careful notes of Bijuu sightings by both of them, trying to piece together a map of the world and where the Bijuu had been.

Deidara and Hinata bonded. Or rather, re-bonded, catching up on lost time. But... something was off. Something they couldn't fix easily. They had lost three years. And now, two small children were also between them. In a way, Sasori and Neji were always between them, too. Both of them knew this, but they never verbally acknowledged it. They would just sit quietly together, his arm around her shoulders, hers around his waist. They would braid each other's hair, mostly for the shock value, but it quickly turned into much more fun when Seishirou decided he wanted his hair braided as well.

And just like that, with a three-year-old's large, ringed eyes staring at them as he politely asked for his hair to be braided, too, please, because he wanted to look just like Deidara, both Hinata and Deidara realized that maybe change wasn't such a bad thing.

"If you have such long hair, kiddo, you're going to be mistaken for a girl, yeah. Now do you want that?" Deidara asked. Seishirou was sitting, squirming, in his lap, trying to be patient enough for the blonde to finish braiding his hair. Evidently it was a difficult feat for him. Hinata sat beside them, smiling, because Takamaru had called Deidara 'kiddo'.

"You look more like a girl than I do. You have more feminine features," Seishirou told him matter-of-factly.

Deidara looked at Hinata, mouthing, "What have you been teaching this kid?"

"He's precocious."

"Just like my mama. Dad, too," Seishirou said proudly. "Are you done yet?"

"If you're so impatient, maybe I'll just chop it all off," Deidara replied, only half joking. He hadn't liked the feminine remark.

"It'll grow back out." The child was unfazed by the threat. "Look at yours. You had to have cut it sometime, and it's still to your butt. Mama's hair is long, too. So is Dad's. But Sasori-san's isn't... Neither is Hitomi-chan's."

"Are you saying you don't like long hair, yeah?" Deidara asked, frowning. He had a feeling this three-year-old was talking down to him.

"It's girly," the little boy replied blandly. "But with dark hair, it looks pretty. The dark hair and light eyes combination is nice. Light hair and light eyes just makes you look feminine."

"Bya-chan, get me a kunai."

"Deidara-kun, you can't honestly think of cutting your hair just because Seishirou-chan—" Hinata started to retort, but he just shook his head.

"It *is* getting long. Mostly it's been getting in the way, and I haven't cut it only because we haven't had time, yeah. But now we do."

"Doesn't Sasori like long hair?" she asked shrewdly, unable to resist smirking. Deidara blushed, and shrugged.

"He can live with it. Like this precocious little brat said, it'll grow back out."

Seishirou slid down from Deidara's lap, his auburn hair in braids. He then turned around and kicked Deidara in the shin, telling him, "Don't call me a brat."

The blow did nothing more than irritate the Iwa-nin, but he didn't retaliate. Just in case, Hinata gently picked Seishirou up, setting him in her own lap, putting her arms around his tiny shoulders protectively. Deidara laughed at this. "You really are a good mother, Bya-chan. And he's not even... Nevermind." Seishirou didn't know he was adopted, and he didn't need to know. Three or not, he would probably remember something like that. "Now where's that kunai...?"

"There's one inside on the counter, I think. Neji had been using it earlier..."

Deidara returned with the knife, and grabbed his ponytail, cutting it without a second thought. Hinata chuckled when she saw it was lopsided, and spent the next ten minutes evening it out for him. Then, somehow, this evolved into Hinata getting a haircut as well, until both of them had hair just past their shoulders. Seishirou then began playing with the different colored locks of hair, making patterns on the floor below.

When Sasori and Neji came back, map in hand, neither of them could say anything for a long moment. Neji had Hitomi in his arms, having woken up from her nap. The infant giggled shrilly, reaching out for her mother.

"Whose idea was it to leave them alone?" Neji asked, handing over their daughter. Hinata smiled, shaking her head to show off her short hair.

"It hasn't been this short since Deidara's party, has it? At least it'll stop Hitomi-chan from pulling on it so much." To prove her wrong, Hitomi reached up and grabbed a fistful of her dark hair, which was *almost* out of her grasp, but not quite safe. "Still..."

"Look! Hair!" Seishirou cried gleefully, holding up handfuls of blonde and navy locks. Most of his hair had fallen out of the braids, but it still retained a bit of the wave, and one braid stubbornly clung together.

"You... cut your hair." Sasori was staring at Deidara, looking as if he'd been slapped.

"Told you," Hinata said, elbowing Deidara in the side. He grinned sheepishly in response.

"It was getting too long, yeah. Disappointed, Sasori-danna?" Deidara crooned, eyes glittering.

Sasori responded by hitting him on the head, scowling. "No, I was just... surprised. And disappointed in the fact that you two would do such stupid things to spend the time we had just used to finish mapping out the Bijuu's movements with."

"You finished?"

"Yes." Neji unfurled the map on the table. All present, even Seishirou and in a way, Hitomi, eagerly leaned over it. "The red lines are where they've been. The red dots are where they've held some sort of massacre or attack on something. Notice that they're primarily keeping on the western half of the map. They still haven't attacked Kirigakure, and the farthest east they've ever been was Kumogakure, once, to destroy it."

"Kirigakure never had a Jinchuuriki, only the Sanbi, and they left it alone. It's possible that they targeted the other villages precisely as revenge for the years spent as Jinchuuriki weapons. And it's highly likely that they've stationed themselves somewhere in the western mountain range; the farthest east their little hideaway would be would be Amegakure," Sasori explained, drawing a line with his finger down the westernmost mountain range. It was a vague area, but at least they knew to avoid that half of the world. Kirigakure suddenly sounded a lot better, too.

"And... they know that we're not going to go to Kirigakure, yeah," Deidara murmured, tapping his chin in thought.

"Exactly. They don't know much about shinobi and how they work, but they do know, from their experiences as Jinchuuriki and with the Akatsuki, that high-level shinobi naturally stay away from organized villages."

"And it's also possible that they don't want to attack Kiri because all of the remaining shinobi in the world have migrated there. Even for a demon, it would be difficult to get anyone out of a village with that many ninja," Sasori added. Hinata nodded, running her fingers through Hitomi's short, black hair as she thought about some of the things they were speaking of. So Kiri had suddenly turned into a giant safe house? Or maybe a panic room would be a better description of what the village had become...

A week later, they were packing their things for their move. Luckily, they had bird power, so there was plenty of room for everything, and time wasn't much of a problem. It should only take two or three days to get to Kirigakure. Seishirou was bouncing off of the walls with excitement; he couldn't remember their first move, and looked at this at some sort of great, new adventure. Even Hitomi started laughing and smiling whenever Seishirou would come into the room. His energy was infectious.

"Are you going to keep this?" Deidara asked. He had been wondering about it the entire time. Hinata glanced at the feather from Takamaru, and then looked at him.

"You can have it if you want it."

"I don't want it." Or rather, he wasn't sure if he could handle having it. And it wouldn't suit any practical purpose; he didn't know how to wield a sword. No doubt Sasori would get rid of it, in spite of the emotional ties to it. Or maybe because of those ties. "You can keep it, yeah."

"You can have this, though." Deidara was surprised when she offered up one of her (many) photo albums. He opened his mouth to say no, but Hinata just shook her head. More firmly than what was probably needed. "It's not as if you're taking it *from* me. I made copies. And most of those pictures concern you, too, Deidara-kun, so it'd be nice to think that you have them. It's a way of sharing memories. I even put in a few new ones."

He opened it to the last pages, smiling when he saw himself and Hinata, arm in arm, grinning with their shorter hair. Another of Sasori holding Seishirou, the child with a fistful of his scarlet hair in his hands, grinning broadly (Sasori didn't look nearly as pleased). Even the sole group picture Hinata had managed to snap of them, children, Kisho and all. There was even one of his clay birds in the background. "Thank you."

"No need."

Deidara last saw Hinata (and the rest of her family) at the gates of Kirigakure. Seishirou was waving at them frantically, his other arm clutching the stuffed chicken Deidara had given him as a gift. Hitomi was on Hinata's hip, and her mother was waving her little hand in the air for her. Neji could only cross his arms and offer a nod. Deidara, walking backwards, was waving both hands in the air, shouting farewells and love at the top of his lungs. Sasori, like Neji, was ignoring the general emotional strain of the situation, and could only pull his partner along behind him when it dragged on too long.

"Bye, Bya-chan!" Deidara offered as one last goodbye. She shouted something back in reply, but he didn't hear her. They were gone, then, back into the wilderness to face what the Akatsuki had unleashed upon the world.

Credits

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

WARNING: This chapter is just... wrapping things up. NOT THE STORY. Credits, and a few interesting tidbits, but if you clicked on this chapter expecting more Hinata and Deidara goodness, boy you sure just got shorted. A lot of this is my rambling, too, so feel free to ignore this chapter completely.

Ending Notes: Well, this is the last official chapter of *Dark Knight*. That's right. After this, there won't be any more updates, no more waiting for me to get back from one of my trips, no more arguments over which Hinata pairing is better. (Because that question has already been answered at this point, of course.)

This is the ending chapter. Not the epilogue; you guys have already gotten one of those. If *Dark Knight* was a DVD, think of this as the 'bonus' section. The soundtrack used for the story, each character or pairing's theme song, little tidbits, and possibly more. You'll just have to keep reading.

But, of course, you have to get through the entire movie first.

That involves the credits.

(and don't forget about the *sequel*, but first choke through this if you're so inclined)

--.-

CREDITS

Writer: Digital Skitty

Official Betas: Centurious The Azure, IcePrincessWinter, & Pencil-chan-sama

Unofficial Betas: Eithy, DeschiZap (who regrettably does not have a account), & everyone else who has ever helped me with ideas.

(Official?) Illustrations: Digital Skitty (DarkKnightnojutsu on deviantArt)

Fanart (Unofficial Illustrations?): Everyone who has ever drawn DK-related arts. :D;; Which is a surprising amount of you... All of them that were uploaded to deviantArt can be viewed in DarkKnightnojutsu's favorites.

Contestants: All art in the contest for the final stretch belongs to their respective owners. X3 They are as follows:

Tsuuseki
Sassy-hime (both entries)
Justine-bowder
Vallin55amaya (both entries)
Greenpanic6 (both entries)

DISCLAIMERS

I, Digital Skitty, do *not* own the following, and shamefully use all of the following *without* permission but do not make any money off of:

-the Naruto manga, anime, universe, and canon characters. This includes Deidara, Hinata, Neji, Sasori, the Akatsuki, the Bijuu, Konohagakure, Amegakure, and any other characters unless specifically mentioned otherwise.

-the music used in the Musical Chapter, and the music used below in the Soundtrack. They belong to their respective owners.

-the concept of the *Houtteoko Onore* jutsu, the 'ignore me' jutsu. This is owned by who was DameWren on this site, though her account was deleted for unknown reasons. (In her story, it was called the 'Gliding Eyes jutsu'.)

-Sanada (or Ikari) Daisuke. He is owned by Centurious The Azure. (Well okay I used *this* one with permission...)

-and probably many other things that I'm forgetting...

THANKS

I would sincerely like to thank *each and every single one of you*.

For reading, reviewing, adding to your favorites, making fanart, entering into the lame contest, anything and everything. I really can't believe that so many people like this story.

By name, however, I would like to thank my three wonderful, youthful and supporting betas. Centurious, FirePrincess, and Pencil-chan. (yosh!)

And Eithne, for always supporting me in my writing and drawing and everything. (seriously I love you, love. And there is SO MUCH you've helped me with XD) It really is impossible to show everyone how much she helped me. (And she's like my bff, too. XD)

All of you who made me fanart, especially Hatakegirlz, Dragononic, Eithne, DangerousEmotions101, Nyship, vallin55amaya, sassy-hime, and greenpanic6 for making more than one.

More thanks for Nyaa-Neko, for supporting me in my drawing and Japanese. Somewhat unwittingly, but nonetheless. (and for choking through my 'Naruto' phase.)

For Black55widow, the good Samaritan, and who decided to review every single chapter (during the fifties, too, I think) just to boost my review count.

For Bishieluver01, who I think reviewed pretty much every chapter, and spammed my page lovingly with our arguments about Sasuke. (who is better than Itachi.)

For Teslyn and Fefisgbf13 and Subakukyuu and Katreda and Adelaide 'Adell' Peirce and Wryter4-hire and ShadowOwl (long list!), who have also spammed my inbox lovingly (I hope) with their many many reviews for pretty much every chapter.

For Art is A Bang, since she started impossibly late in the game and still managed to both catch up and review every chapter.

And also for Syphma, since she also started impossibly late in the game and left me amazingly long (mature) reviews.

Kerii-tan, who I think very possibly first got me seeing another side of Deidara. (I still admire your writing, even if you've stopped it.)

For Hali-chan and Kawaiiitahina123, who made me fall out of my chair laughing with their remarks on Deidara and Sasori.

For Pantsofdeath, for making my night with her review for chapter 64, and yet *still* reading the story after my bitchy reply.

For Hina-chancares8 who had to relay eight other people's reactions in her review, and was kind enough to tell me that I ought to take over the Naruto series. (Seriously, that review will always make me giggle and blush so happily.)

For Nyship Lymen, who repeatedly made me spazz whenever I'd get the email alerts for the next portion of our conversation. Not to mention all of the fanart.

For the five contestants for *Dark Knight's* first and only contest, and for their wonderfully awesome entries. I had a beast of a time judging them, let me tell you. (I honestly ended up with a five-way tie for first place the first time I tried.)

And of course, for Masashi Kishimoto, though he will never read this (hopefully), for creating such a lovely, if over hyped, series.

And *honestly*. ALL OF YOU GUYS who are sitting here reading this thinking 'finally, she's done with this infernal story'. Thanks for choking through it. (And that amazingly long 'thanks' section. XD; It's over now, though...)

-.-.-

EXTRAS

DID YOU KNOW

(yes, now the credits are over so you can start reading here again)

Did You Know?

This story came from a dream. I started this story with just the scene of the Konoha attack and the ending where Neji tells Hinata he loves her (albeit both came out a bit differently due to scene constraints), and spawned this entire novel from that.

Dark Knight was originally supposed to be a Sasuke and Hinata pairing. But the pairing doesn't work out without direct interaction between them, so it sort of flopped. Neji just took over from there on his own. (My first art EVAR of *Dark Knight* showed the attempted SasuHina.)

In his *own* story, Daisuke is closer to Sasuke, and is Suigetsu's adoptive little brother. Due to plot restraints, I couldn't fit those in really, but the thought of Suigetsu being called 'niichan' warms my heart to this day.

Sasori was always going to live in my story. He wasn't, however, supposed to go into the cave with Chiyo and Sakura; originally he was meant to fight his grandmother in Sunagakure and 'die' trying to kill her there.

Eithne (Eithy) is considered the Kabuto goddess (in my eyes, at least). Whenever I write a serious Kabuto scene or had a question about him, I always turned to her for help. (Kakashi, too.) Needless to say, during the Konoha invasion arc (or the beginning of it—primarily chapters 69 and 70), I IMed her a *lot*.

'Midori' means 'green'. She became the Rain Lord on a whim—and not only Pein's whim. Originally I wasn't exactly sure where she was going, though it had to do something with the Iwa ANBU. Needless to say, the idea was scrapped.

Midori is an actual character from the Naruto series—granted, Midori was male and died soon after his introduction, and no one knows who he was anyway (haha). But not only that—I actually (accidentally!) used the same name for two characters! (Props to who noticed this. And if you did—why didn't you notify me?!)

I honestly hadn't known that DeiHina was a pairing until I got the reviews about it.

This was also supposed to be a sort of study on the Stockholm Syndrome (which is my favorite form of trauma, I think). And it still kind of turned out that way, which was fun.

Originally, Sukeru and Takamaru were supposed to have a slightly romantic, very angsty scene to themselves before they died. Sukeru would have been begging Takamaru to stay, just because she "had a bad feeling about him leaving her". And Takamaru, of course, would still go.

Also originally, Hinata *was* going to go into the battle with the Bijuu. But she would have been in there at the start, and she would have been ordered to go after Kisame's death.

Dark Knight (minus the epilogue) was finished on August 1st, 2008, at 4.23pm (ish). Then I

realized that I forgot a crucial scene and went back to fix it. It (with the epilogue) was *really* completed on August 10th, some time in the evening. XD; Four days short of a year and a half, neh.

-.-.-

SOUNDTRACK

Themes

Hinata's Themes: Big Girls Don't Cry (Fergie); Let Go (Frou Frou)
Deidara's Themes: It's My Life (Bon Jovi); Everything Is Alright (Motion City Soundtrack)
Neji's Themes: Kryptonite (3 Doors Down); In Between (Linkin Park)
Sasori's Themes: Somewhere I Belong (Linkin Park); How To Save A Life (The Fray)
Itachi's Theme: Let You Down (Three Days Grace)
Sasuke's Theme: Until The End (Breaking Benjamin)
Kabuto's Theme: Doctor Jones (Aqua)
Pein's Themes: This Ain't A Scene, It's An Arms Race (Fall-Out Boy); Never Too Late (Three Days Grace)
Konan's Theme: Blue (Yoko Kanno)
(Daisuke's Theme: I Wear My Sunglasses At Night (Corey Hart))
Pein & Konan's Theme: Pictures Of You (The Last Goodnight)
Deidara & Hinata's Themes: Friend or Foe (t.A.T.u.)
Neji & Hinata's Themes: What Have You Done (Within Temptation); My Oh My (Aqua); With You (Jessica Simpson)
Neji & Sasuke's Theme: Hero's Come Back (Nobody Knows+)
Deidara & Neji's Theme: Parade (Chaba)
Sasori & Deidara's Themes: Stay (DDR Max 2); The Truth About Heaven (Armor For Sleep)
Kakashi & Kabuto's Theme: You Could Be Happy (Snow Patrol)
Takamaru & Sukeru's Theme: Always (Blink 182)
Akatsuki's Themes: Be Human (Scott Matthew); Dust (Bright Eyes); Start Wearing Purple (Gogol Bordello), Viva La Vida (Coldplay)

Soundtrack

To You All (Aluto)
Wind (Akeboshi)
Roses Are Red (Aqua)
Wouldn't It Be Nice (Beach Boys)
Happy Go Lucky (Steps)
Robot (t.A.T.u.)
Omna Magni (Makino Yui)
Goodbye (SR-17)
There She Goes (Sixpence None The Richer)
Two Worlds (Phil Collins)
The WORLD (Nightmare)

The Sweet Escape (Gwen Stefani)
It's Good To Be In Love (Frou Frou)
Sweet Dreams Are Made Of These (Eurythmics)
Bring It (Cobra Starship)
This Is A Song For The Lonely (Cher)

-.-.-

FAQ

(well, not so much FAQ, but more questions that you readers felt weren't answered by the story. Or even questions I got in reviews that made me laugh.)

Q: WHY NO DEIHINA?

A: BECAUSE IT IS SILLY.

Q: How did you do it?

A: With a lot of fangirling, chocolate, and research. But mostly it was just the support. :D

Q: Didn't everyone die?

A: JUST YOU WAIT kukuku.

Q: How many pages is this?

A: Can I use a lifeline? (I ran out of fingers and toes. D:)

Q: You're a she, right?

A: NO ACTUALLY I'M AN EIGHTY YEAR OLD GUY WHO LIVES IN HIS DEAD MOTHER'S CLOSET. (Don't ask. XD;) Yes, I'm female.

Q: Is Tobi *really* gone?

A: And here's the million dollar question, folks. XD I don't feel like committing either way.

Q: Oh my god you're heartless! -cry-

A: -bottles tears for later- Just wait until you see *White Knight*. ;D

Q: So *White Knight* is the sequel or something?

A: No, I lied, it's a completely different story that I just happen to be using the same characters with a continued plot and a similar name and motifs.

Q: (For Sasuke and his group—because it was more fun to answer it in-character): What happened to you guys?!

A: Sasuke: ...Che. How's that relevant to *you*? (-is hit-) We went off after killing Itachi, of course. Just wandered around for a little while... Suigetsu and Karin got a bit 'closer'... And we've settled in an area near the Konoha and Ame border. That's *it*.

Q: Did Sasori ever use the Kakashi puppet?

A: It's not stated explicitly, but I assume so. :D He definitely uses it a lot later on... (The first fight he's in in *White Knight* he uses it!)

Q: Where did Zetsu go?

A: Oh, he got the hell out of Dodge after Konan's order. After that, he stopped by Kusa for a bit (homesickness?), and after that, he mostly just traveled, keeping tabs on the Bijuu and other living Akatsuki members from a distance...

And waaaah, that's it! Only one person asked any of the characters questions. D: And here I could think of a few good ones off the top of my head...

--.-

Once upon a time...

There was a beautiful princess named Bya-chan...

Then, she met a dragon, Deidara, and the world went to hell because of it.

The end.

Now, the world just needs a white knight for a shot at redemption...

We all know that Neji is the supposed 'dark knight'. And we've seen both sides of the coin, both the dragons' world and their dreams, and the kingdom the princess left behind. We've met knights and dragons and princes and princesses and kings and queens and peasants and maybe a wizard or two. (Not to mention concubines, one mean ghost, a fangirl Rain Lord, and whatever the hell role Sasuke fills.)

The white knight died. Or rather, Uzumaki Naruto died. After all, what qualities of a knight did he possess? He was fodder for the Bijuu jutsu and the cause of a war.

But... if he's not the white knight... who is?

Chapter End Notes

((2022 crosspost update: wow, look at all those words! it's funny how differently ao3 counts words compared to ff.net, though.

i have no plans at this time to upload white knight to ao3, as it remains discontinued. you can still find it on my fanfiction.net profile - my username there is "digital skitty" as well. also, on deviantArt, my old username was digital-skitty there, i'm pretty sure.

in a lot of ways, i'm still proud of this fic. it was the first novel i ever finished. naruto, and this project, hold a special place in my heart. thank you for reading.))

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!